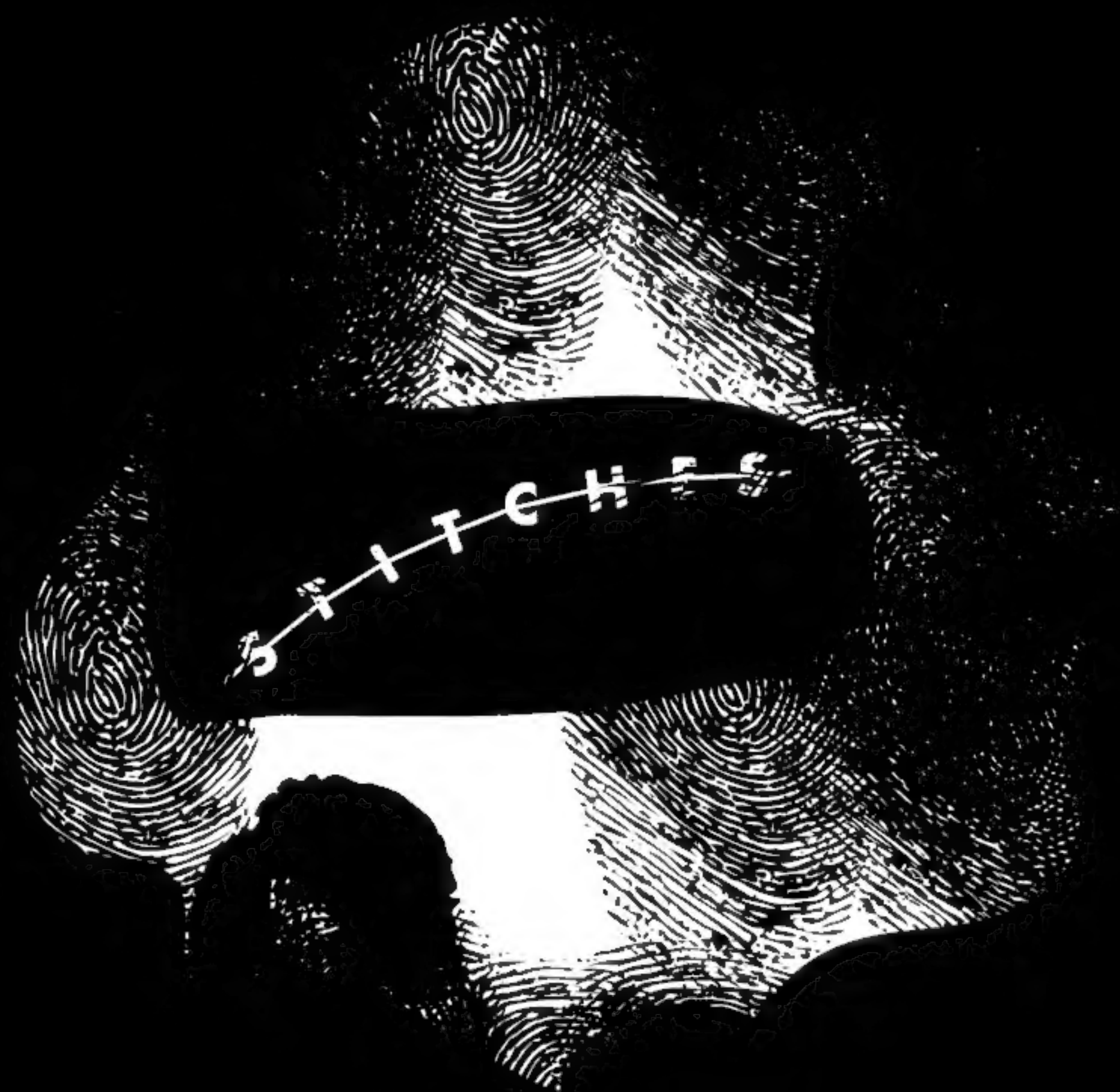


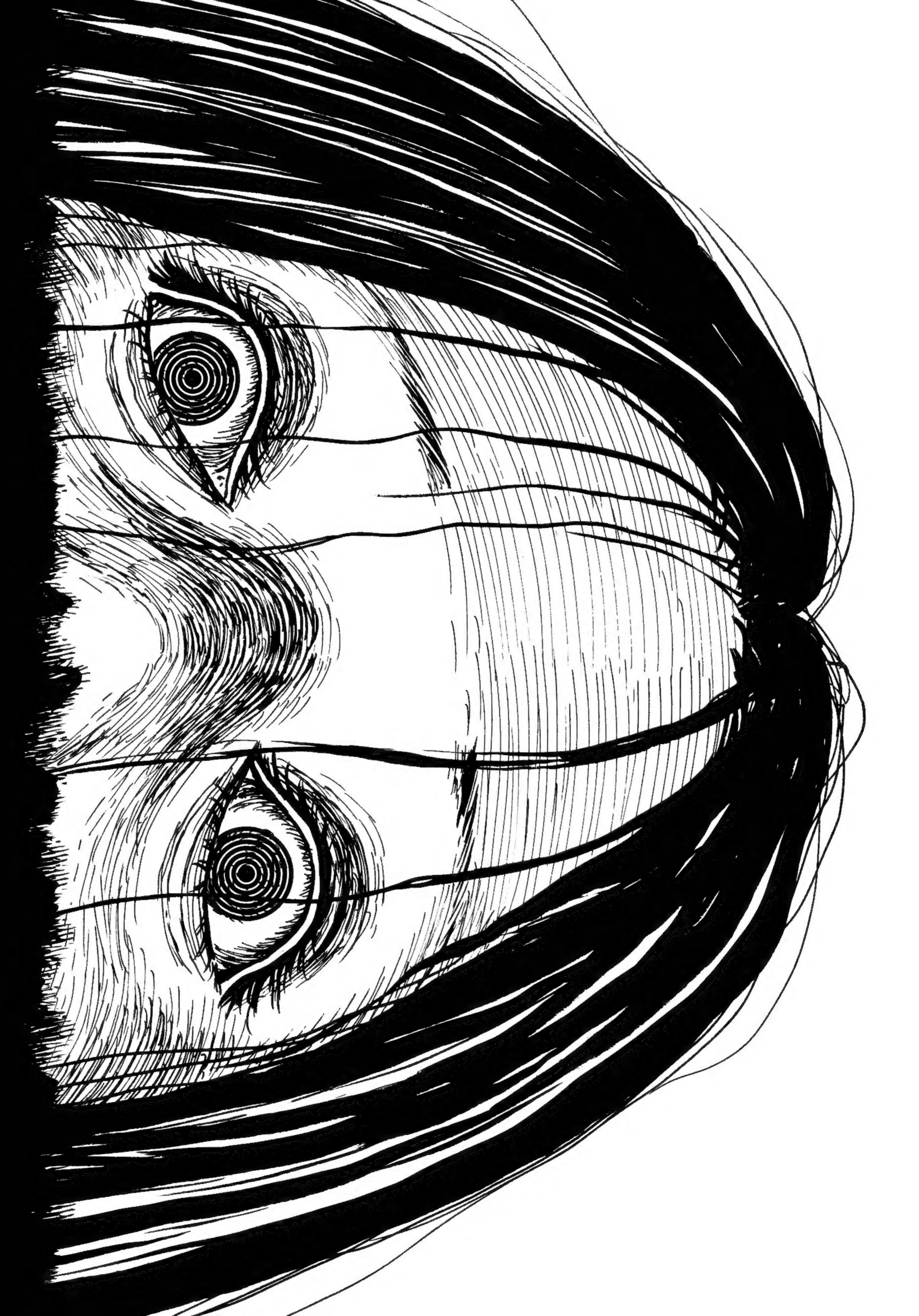


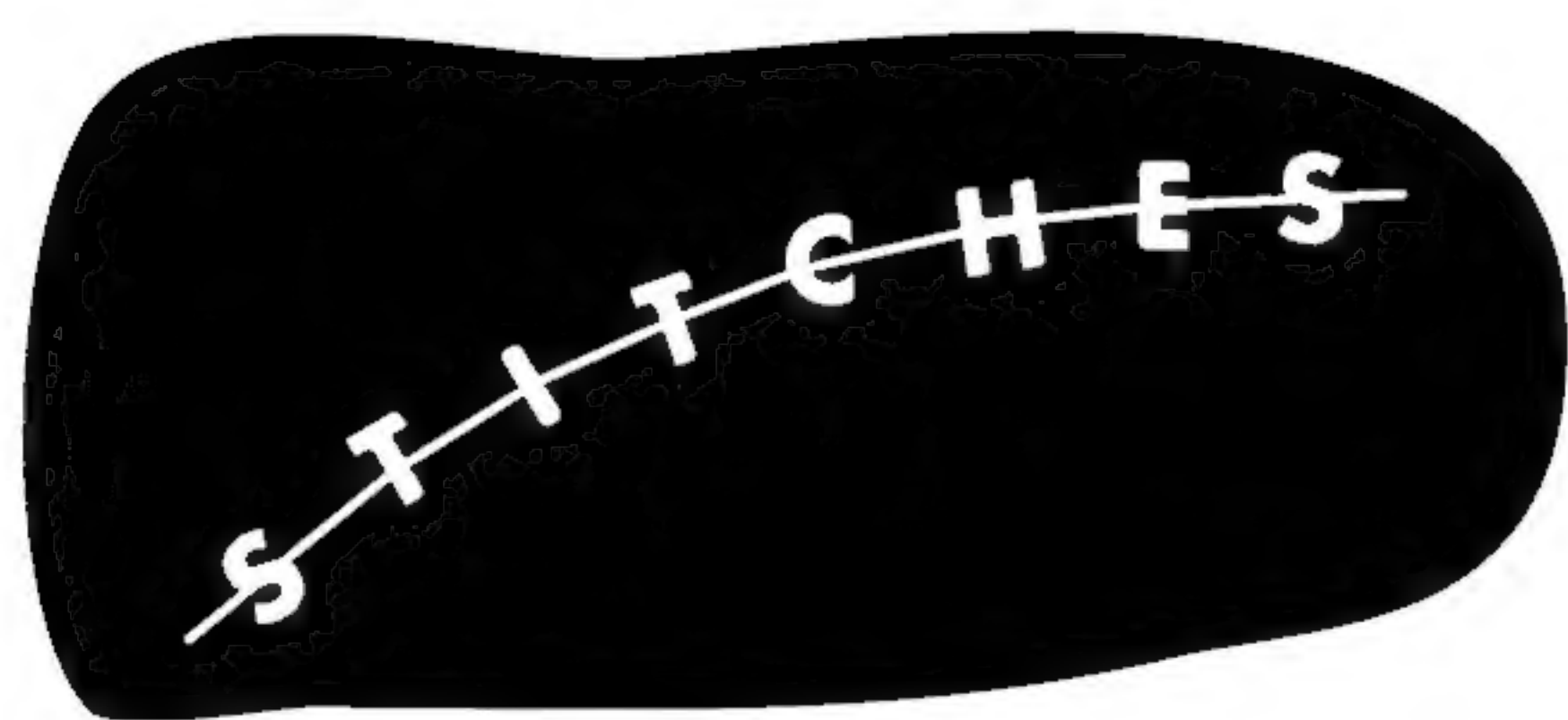
S-T-O-R-I-E-S

Short Stories by HIROKATSU KIHARA
Art by JUNJI ITO









Short Stories by **HIROKATSU KIHARA**
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STITCH 1: Face ... 9

STITCH 3: From the Sea ... 25

STITCH 2: Library ... 17

STITCH 4: Festival of the Dead ... 32

STITCH 5: The Play ... 40

STITCH 6: Folk Dance ... 49

FINAL STITCH: Lips ... 73

STITCH 8: Snow Day ... 65

STITCH 7: The Kimono ... 57

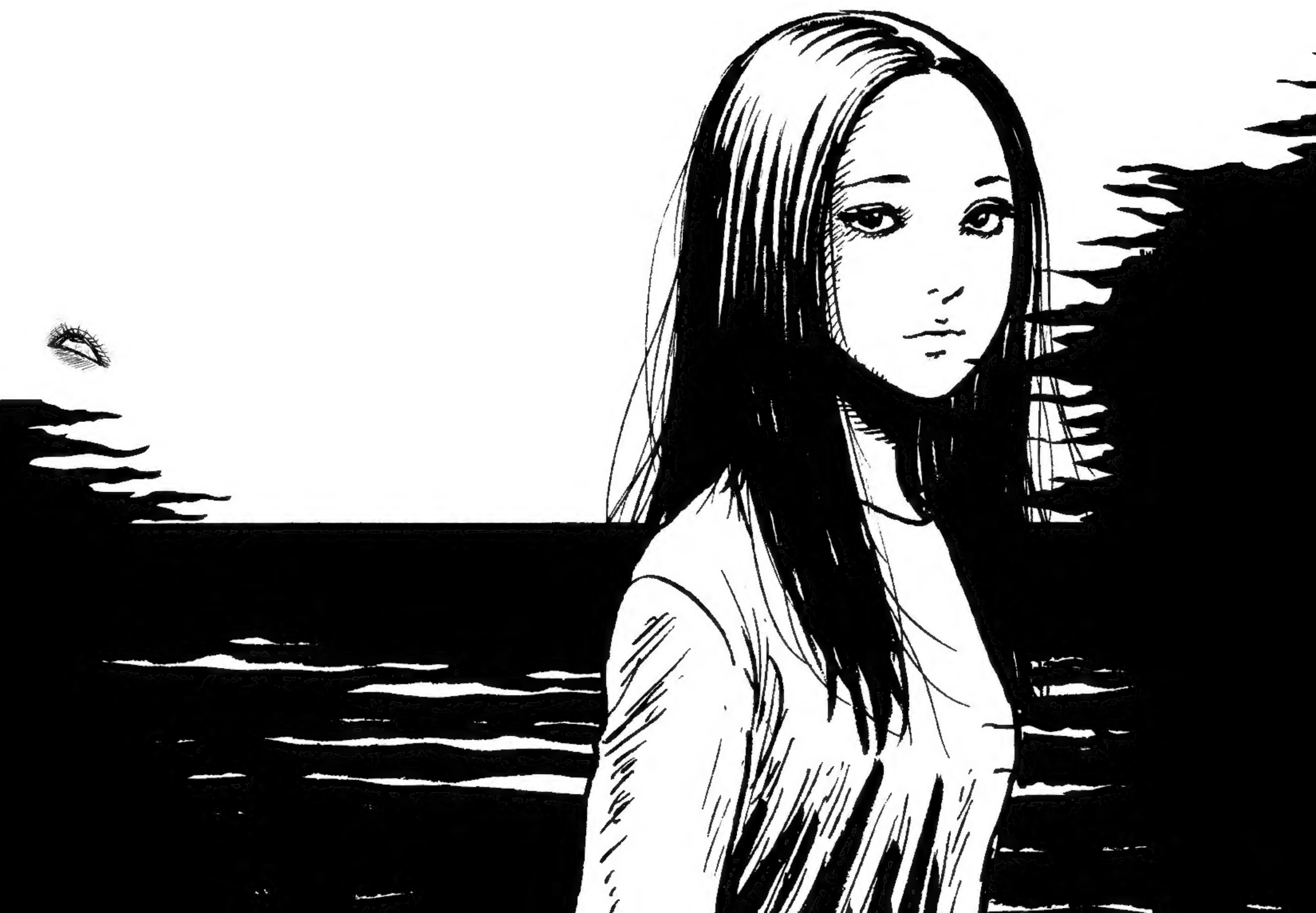
BONUS MANGA:
Summer Graduation
Trip ... (READ FROM THE
OTHER SIDE OF THE BOOK)



AFTERWORD ... 82
ABOUT THE AUTHORS ... 85

STITCH 1

Face



THIS IS A TALE FROM ABOUT TWENTY YEARS AGO.

Mr. and Mrs. A decided they were done with city life and made up their minds to move to a remote island. Mr. A had grown up in the countryside, and the city, with its lack of green spaces and the general unsociability of the people, had never been a good fit for him.

So when he was looking for a new job, he set his sights on an island blessed with abundant natural beauty where residents actually knew each other. He knew that he never wanted to return to the city, so he bought some land on this island and built a house for himself and his wife.

One day, he woke up to find that the sun was already high in the sky. Normally his wife would have woken him for breakfast by then, but for some reason she hadn't that day.

What's going on? Is she sick? he wondered, and looked with concern at the futon next to his own.

But not only was she not sleeping beside him, her futon wasn't even there. It had already been tucked away in the closet.

Thinking this strange, he got up and went out into the living room, where he found his wife at last, sitting in a chair with a faraway look on her face. He turned to the table and saw that breakfast was all laid out, waiting for them to eat it.

He assumed that something must have happened, but when he asked her about it, she didn't so much as twitch.

Worried now, he grabbed her shoulders and gave her a shake as he peered at her face. The expression on it was very different from usual.

"Honey, are you okay?" he said, getting more concerned by the second.

She abruptly stood up. "Follow me," commanded the rough, throaty voice of a man.

Mr. A gaped in shock as his wife marched over to the front door and went outside. He hurried after her, but was startled again when he saw that his sandals

were missing from where he had left them in the entryway. In their place were his wife's smaller sandals.

Why on earth would she not wear her own sandals?

His feet were too big for her shoes, so he pulled a pair of sneakers out of the shoe closet and slipped them on.

Snap! One of his laces broke.

He had a feeling that this was very much not a good omen, but he was more concerned about losing sight of his wife. And so he opened the shoe closet once more, grabbed a pair of boots, and went chasing after her.

When she finally stopped, they were at the cemetery behind the ancient temple not too far from their home. But because they had moved to the island from the mainland, and temples generally served the same families over generations, Mr. and Mrs. A had never had anything to do with this temple. They hadn't even been to it before.

What could possibly have made her come here, of all places?

Just as he was about to give voice to the question, his wife abruptly collapsed on the small path between the graves.

He rushed to her side, picked her up, and went up to the temple proper to seek help from the chief priest. With the assistance of the priest, he got her inside and laid her down on a futon. Then he noticed a lump about the size of a golf ball on the side of her neck.

Impossible!

The lump looked like a man's face.

Mr. A could see a bulge that looked like a nose, hollows to either side that might have been eyes, and even a faint, liplike swelling below it.





What is this? When he reached out to touch the face-shaped tumor, it moved away from his hand, toward his wife's shoulders.

What in the world?!

He gasped in disbelief, while out of the corner of his eye, he saw the chief priest staring fixedly at the face tumor.

"You two picked quite the spot to build your house, hm?" he sighed. "Been a good many years since I saw anything of this nature."

He left the room and returned shortly with a calligraphy brush and inkstone.

"Well, I can make it so it doesn't do evil, at least," he said, and then ordered Mr. A to take off his unconscious wife's clothes.

"Why would you—?" Mr. A stared in confusion, flustered at the sudden demand.

"Look at her!" the priest barked.

Mr. A turned back to his wife, as ordered. He could tell even through her clothing that *something* was winding its way around her body. The priest was right. They couldn't just leave her like that. Mr. A took off his wife's clothes.

When she was completely naked, the priest got his brush out and began to write the traditional Buddhist prayer "*Namu Amida Butsu*" in tightly packed kanji characters on every bit of her exposed skin, from her head down to her knees.

The tumor face scowled and shifted around to his wife's back, disappearing from view.

Once the priest had covered Mrs. A's front in black ink, he flipped her over and began to write his prayer on her back. As the neat rows of kanji marched down from the back of her neck, the tumor with the face of a man was forced steadily downward, toward her feet. When it at last reached the back of her knees, it abruptly vanished.

After the priest was done with her, Mrs. A looked just like Hoichi the Earless, the blind minstrel from the folktale who was similarly painted in prayer to protect him from ghosts.

When Mr. A asked if she would be all right now, the priest grimaced and shook his head.

"It's not over. All this'll do is keep the evil inside. You get your wife dressed, I'll call a taxi. And I'll tell the driver where you're going."

Mr. A had no sooner finished yanking his wife's clothes back on than a car pulled up in front of the temple. He set his wife down on the back seat and climbed in beside her.

Soon, the taxi was stopping at the oldest shrine on the island. And it seemed that the temple priest had called ahead—the shrine's chief priest was waiting for them beneath the red *torii* gate.

Mr. A could hardly hold a thought in his head, so stunned was he by the impossibility of everything that was happening. Nonetheless, he still had the wherewithal to realize that the temple priest had been so quick to jump into action, so thoroughly prepared, that this couldn't have been the first time he'd dealt with something like this.

The shrine priest leaped into the taxi and asked, "Where do you live?"

At a total loss now, Mr. A told the man his address, and the driver set the car in motion again, like this was all old hat.

As soon as they arrived at the house, the priest left Mrs. A in the car and practically dragged Mr. A into the house. He walked through every room, carefully inspecting every detail, and then froze in place when they came to the living room.

"Aha! So this is the spot?" He began to chant a ritual prayer.

When he was finished, he nodded with satisfaction. "Now she'll be all right."

"Ah!"

Mr. A heard his wife cry out in surprise at the front door.

Apparently, she didn't remember a single thing that had happened that day.

STITCH 1/END





STITCH 2 **Library**



J TOLD ME THIS STORY

of an experience she had when she was in junior high.

Her school was an old wooden building, and in the library, there was a small *kamidana* shrine, the unobtrusive sort found in many households.

After classes one day in the fall of eighth grade, she was walking through the school to the library to return a book she had borrowed. She glanced up and saw a girl who couldn't have been older than eleven or twelve running toward her from the other end of the hallway.

Clad in a short-sleeved white blouse and red skirt, braids swinging as she ran, the girl flung open the door to the library and raced inside ahead of J.

J was wearing the winter version of her school uniform, with long sleeves covering her arms, since there was a definite chill in the air at this time of year. Most of the colorful leaves had fallen from the trees she could see beyond the windows.

Short sleeves in this season! Must be nice to be so full of life. She must be someone's little sister, she mused to herself as she approached the library door. But funnily enough, it was closed.

Huh? I'm pretty sure she left it open when she went inside, though.

Frowning, J stepped inside, and as she handed her book to one of the students on duty at the front desk, she asked about the girl who had just come in.

"What girl? Who are you talking about?"

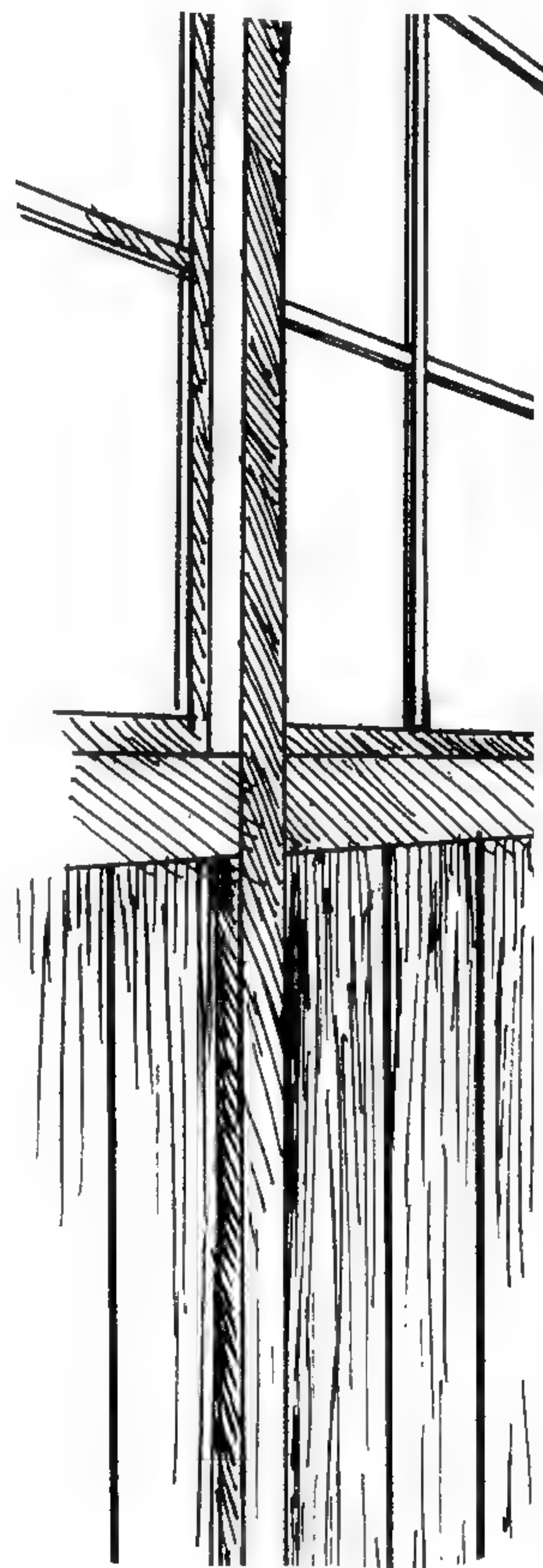
The girls standing behind the desk looked at each other, as if for confirmation.

"Forget it," J said. "I must've seen wrong." She stepped into the stacks and began to scan the shelves for a new book to borrow. She didn't give the matter of the girl too much more thought.

After browsing a while, she pulled a volume off the shelf as someone slipped past behind her. She looked over her shoulder to find the same girl from the hallway dashing around the end of a bookshelf.

It's her! But you're not supposed to run in the library—

"Aaaah!"



J heard a scream, so she whirled around in the opposite direction to find the library attendants staring at the door in shock.

Curious as to what had happened, J walked back over to the desk, joining the other students in the library who had also quickly gathered there.

A teacher stepped through the door from the hallway, perhaps having overheard the scream while walking by the library.

“What’s wrong?”

“What happened?”

Everyone was clamoring, asking questions, and it ended up being a bit of a commotion.

According to the girls behind the library desk, they had seen a younger girl run by and vanish when she reached the doorway, as though she had stepped outside.

“Well, she didn’t!” the teacher told them, as if trying to calm the girls. “I was walking by that very spot when I heard you scream and I came inside. There was no little girl coming out.”

“She didn’t leave, though!” the girls shouted. “*She disappeared!*” And then they burst into tears.

Flustered, the teacher told everyone in the library to go home and left the room.



Three or four days later, J was walking down the hallway in front of the library, but now there was newspaper pasted over the library windows, and a sign that said “entry prohibited” on the door. This was curious enough in and of itself, but the curtains were drawn on the outside windows as well, preventing anyone from seeing inside the library from the outside.

Naturally, students throughout the school began to whisper about this new development. All anyone could talk about was what had happened in the library. Before too long, a rumor started that the ghost of a girl had appeared there.



TOP SIGN: Library BOTTOM SIGN: Entry prohibited

Given that this rumor was the only knowledge they had to go on, the library attendant in J's class asked the teacher about it. The teacher told them that it had nothing to do with a ghost; it was simply that the ceiling in the library was old and in bad shape.

Soon after that, J's father told her that he would be going to her school the following day, a Sunday. He was a member of the PTA, so she assumed it was for some kind of meeting. But she noticed that the look on his face was strangely dark.

"Did something happen in the library at school?" he said, abruptly.

"Why?" she asked in response.

He furrowed his brow and told her that he'd gotten a notice to meet at the library in formal dress for some reason.

J wondered if the girl she'd seen was the reason for all the fuss, but she was too scared to say anything.

After her father got home on Sunday, she asked him what had happened at school.

"All of the bookshelves in the library were pushed up against the walls," he told her. "An altar was set up in the middle of the empty room, and a priest came to do a purification ritual."

The following Monday, all of the curtains in the library had been pulled back, the newspaper was gone from the hallway windows, and the empty bookshelves inside had been returned to their original positions.

The teacher asked the library attendants to come in after classes and help put the books back. The little girl stopped appearing in the library after that.

However, one day sometime later, when a light snow was dusting the ground, the hallway windows were once again covered in newspaper and the curtains drawn on the outside windows.

Had the girl appeared again? The school erupted into speculation.

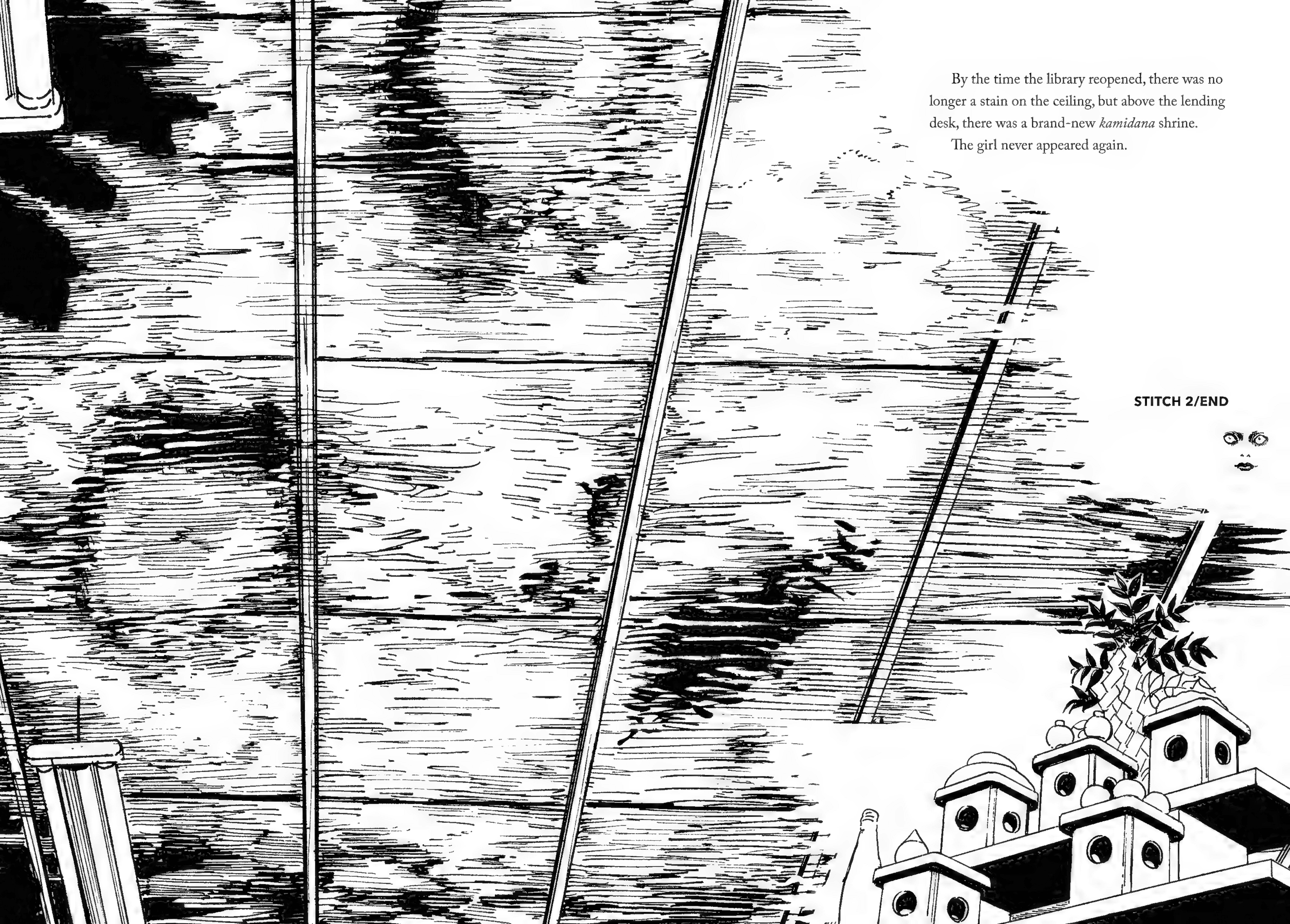
On Sunday of that week, J's father went to school dressed in his finest once more. When he came home, all the color had drained from his face. He was frighteningly pale.

According to him, there had been an altar in the room just like the last time. But this time, there had also been a very, very large stain on the ceiling, and that stain looked exactly like the face of a girl with a pair of braids.

By the time the library reopened, there was no longer a stain on the ceiling, but above the lending desk, there was a brand-new *kamidana* shrine.

The girl never appeared again.

STITCH 2/END

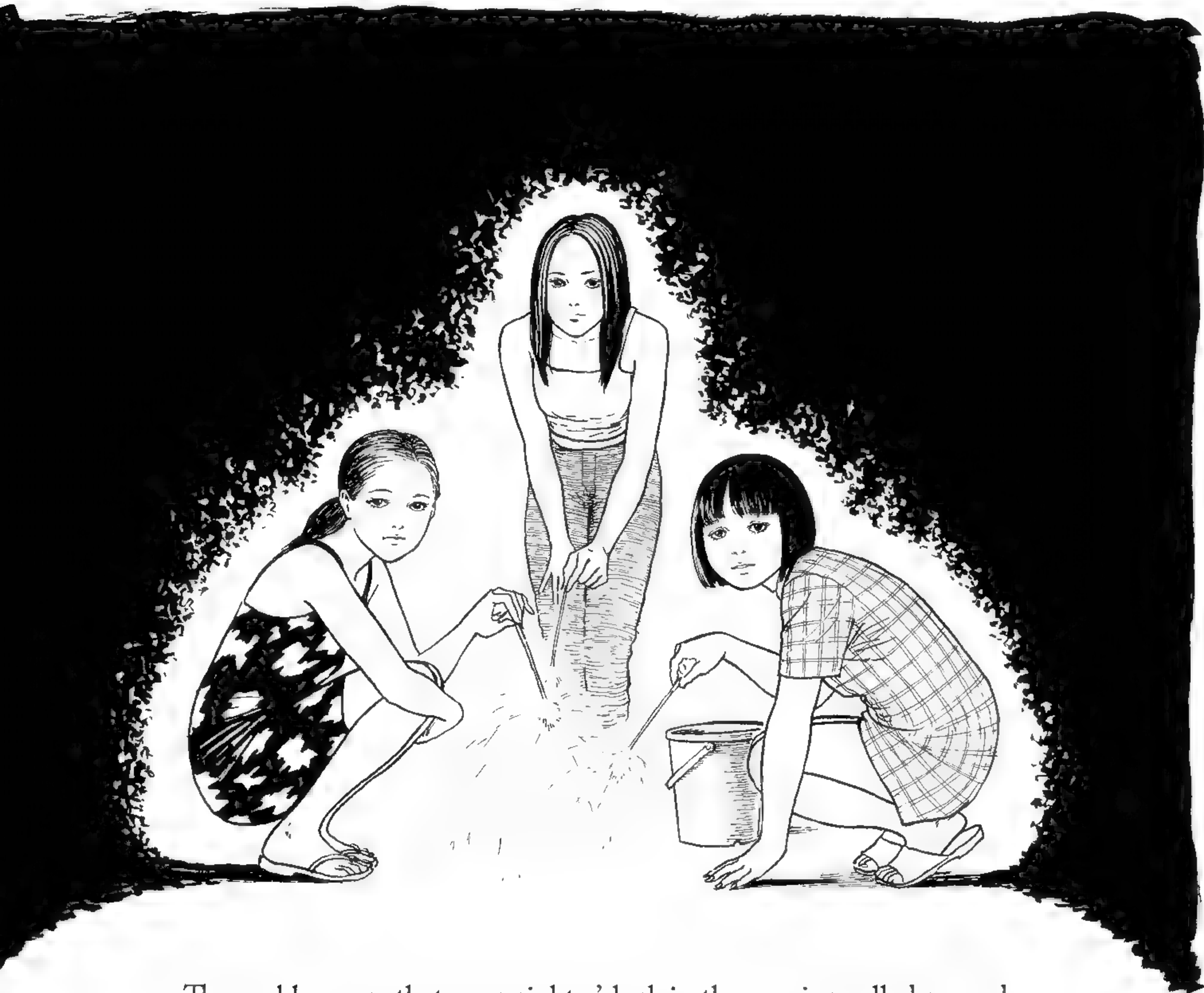




STITCH 3

From the Sea

ONE SUMMER IN HIGH SCHOOL, I went with my friends O and K to stay at my grandmother's house. We spent the first couple days at the beach, swimming in the afternoon and setting off fireworks when evening fell. But we had way too much time on our hands, and by the evening of the fourth day, we honestly didn't know what to do with ourselves.



The problem was that once eight o'clock in the evening rolled around, they basically rolled up the sidewalks. I'm sure this sort of thing happens not only in small coastal towns like this one, but pretty much any village with an aging population.

We were really in the middle of nowhere, though. There wasn't even a convenience store in town. So the three of us were talking, trying to think of something fun to do. But we literally couldn't come up with a single thing.

We were stumped. With no other ideas, we set out on a walk to at least take in the night air or something. We'd hung out plenty on the beach already, so we decided to go up into the mountains.

The moon was full and quite large in the sky, plus there were a ton of stars out, making the path ahead of us surprisingly bright.

Suddenly, O pointed up higher on the green face of the mountain. "What's that?" she asked.

I followed her finger and saw a dazzling light shining there. And there were also smaller, pale glowing dots, like torches, climbing the slope toward the brighter light.

"Good question," I said. "Those lights there are moving up the side of the mountain, so maybe it's part of a festival?"

Thinking about it, I remembered that there was a temple somewhere on this mountain. When I told my friends that the only thing in the area was a temple, they agreed that it was probably people heading up there to prepare for a festival. The three of us figured we might as well go and take a look.

"I'm pretty sure it's around here," I said, from the head of our little line.

Soon, we could see the stone stairs that lead to the temple. We climbed up to find the sliding paper *shoji* doors of the main building were brilliantly lit up. The light was blindingly bright. They must have had every fluorescent light in the building turned on, or maybe it was because the place was surrounded by trees, and thus the area was pitch-black at night.

"I guess the villagers are having some kind of meeting?" O said.

"Isn't it too quiet for that, though?" K replied.

It was indeed very quiet. The silence seemed oppressive, so we decided to move closer to the main building.

When we listened carefully, we could hear the voice of a priest chanting inside. The three of us might have been total city girls, but even we knew that if sutras were being recited, then this wasn't a meeting or preparation for any festival.

"Should we go back?" one of us said.

"Good idea," I said, and turned around to head down the mountain.

At that very moment, five or six balls of white light flew up the stairs from below.

What are those?

About the size of volleyballs, the spheres of light floated past above our heads as we looked on in surprise. They approached the doors of the temple and slipped inside, as though sucked in through the gaps.

The three of us were so scared we couldn't move.

"Hey, that light we saw from down below," O said. "Was that those floaty ball things, too?"

I was too freaked out to say anything at all in response. My brain just kept chanting, *Scary, scary*.

K managed to wrench her mouth open, though, but the only words she could say were, "Go, go."

Her intense desire to run away came through loud and clear.

Able to move again at last, we grabbed each other's hands and ran for the stone staircase to go down.

We could see little balls of light were rising to the surface of the ocean at the end of the path, one after the other. *Pop! Pop! Pop!* They flew toward the stone steps, almost crawling along the ground like little spotlights.

We didn't know what to do. We wanted to go back down, but all these balls of light were shooting up from below!

Our knees gave out, and we dropped to the ground, paralyzed with fear. And then a chain of five or six light balls passed right before our eyes. Before too long, another row of five or six slid by.

After three or four of these processions, the final ball stopped right in front of us. All three of us stared, unable to look away. Suddenly, the sorrowful face of a woman popped up in the center of it.





Please! No more!

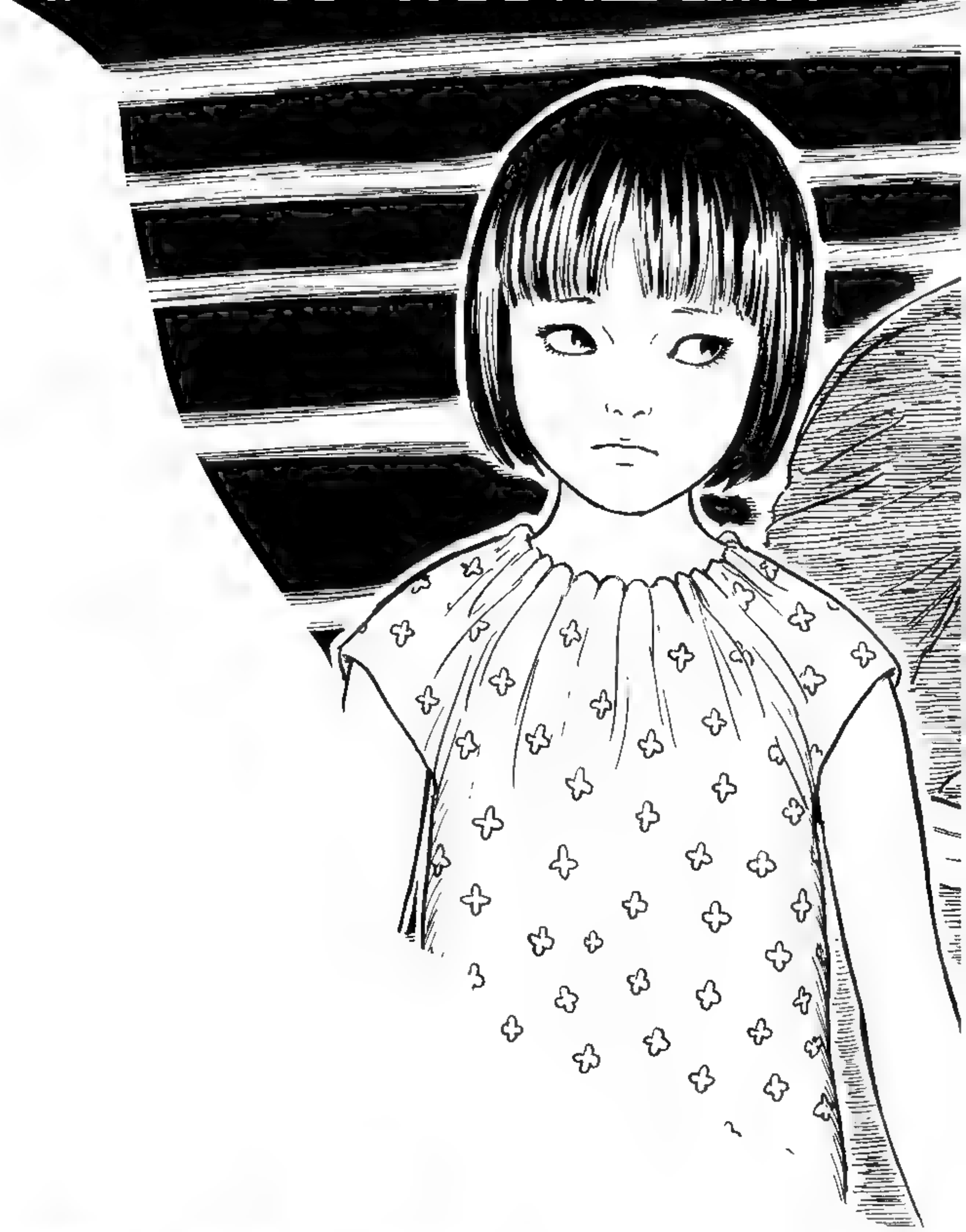
At that moment, we heard a loud voice reciting sutras. Instantly, the ball with the woman's face was sucked into the main shrine building. The sliding doors went dark, and everything was quiet again.

Before I knew it, O, K, and I were alone in the dark, surrounded by the chirping and buzzing of insects. I never knew bugs could be so loud.

But thanks to all
the noise they made, I felt
like the whole thing was
finally over.

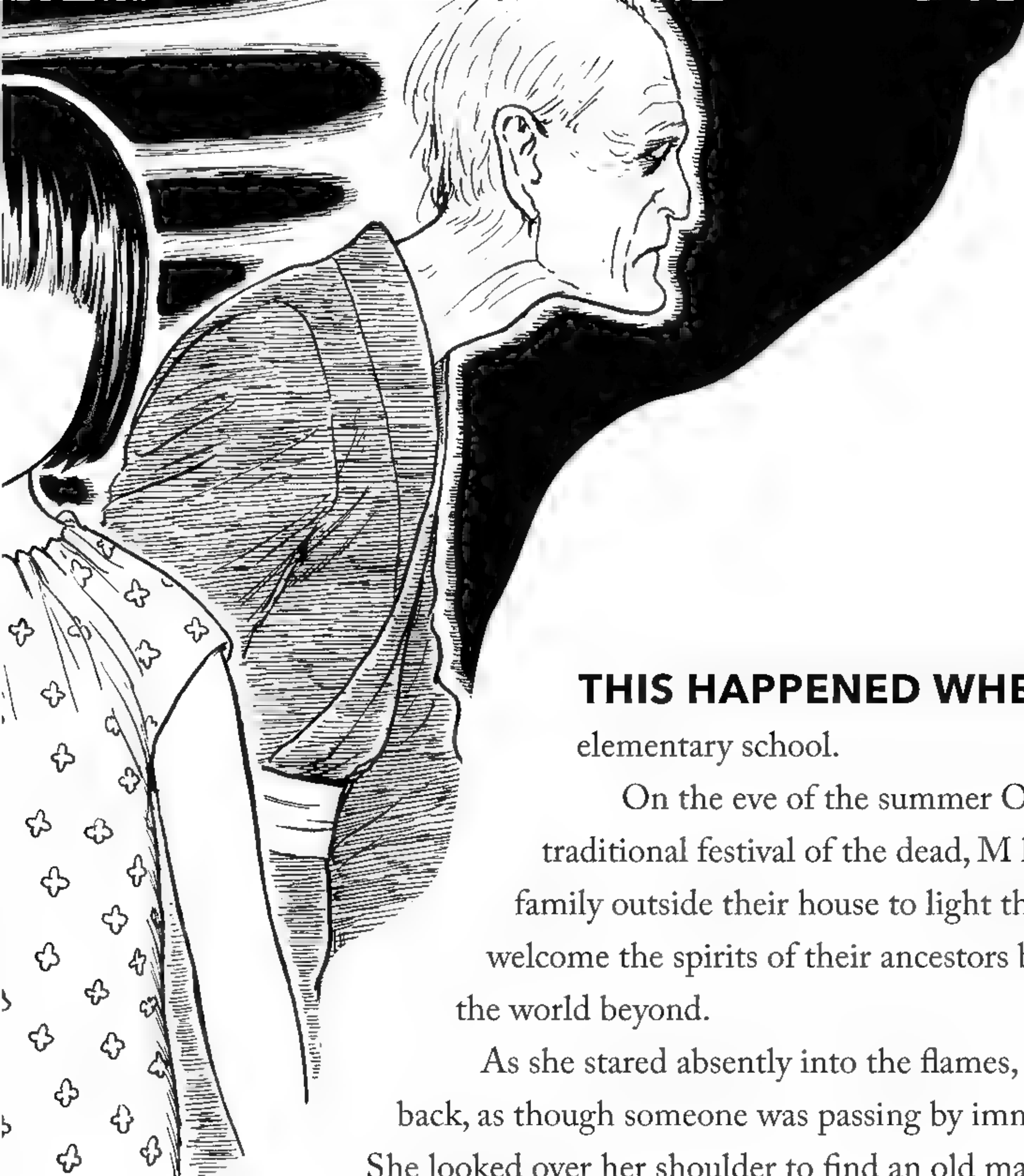


STITCH 3/END



STITCH 4

Festival of the Dead



THIS HAPPENED WHEN M was in elementary school.

On the eve of the summer Obon holiday, the traditional festival of the dead, M had gathered with her family outside their house to light the *mukaebi* fire and welcome the spirits of their ancestors back for a visit from the world beyond.

As she stared absently into the flames, she felt a hand on her back, as though someone was passing by immediately behind her. She looked over her shoulder to find an old man in a kimono walking toward the neighbor's house.

That family of five—grandmother, father, mother, and two children—was also out front, lighting their own *mukaebi* fire. The old man walked past them and in through the gate to the house.

Huh? M frowned, confused.

He had marched right past the neighbors and gone into their house, but for some reason, they hadn't so much as looked up. As M puzzled over this, she realized that she'd seen the man before.

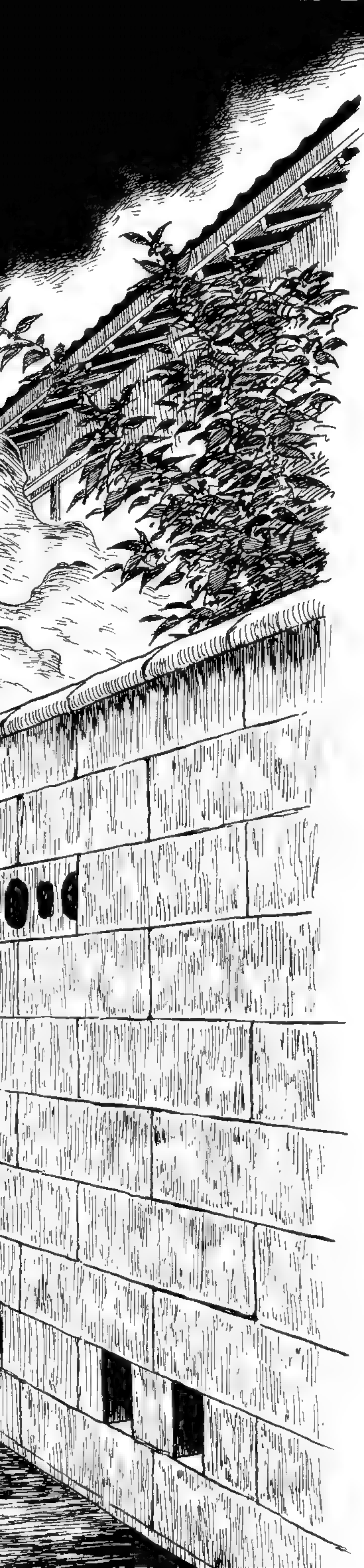
It's their grandpa. But he died three years ago...

M turned to her mother. "The grandpa from next door just walked by."

"Did he now?" her mother said, with a smile. "I guess he came home for Obon." She stood up to go get the bucket of water to put the fire out.

Huh. So he came to visit because it's Obon.

The old man next door had always been extra nice to her when she was small, so she felt a pang of regret that she hadn't been able to thank him or even offer him a brief hello.



Two or three years passed. One winter day, when M was in junior high school, she was riding her bike home after practice when she spotted someone in a kimono up ahead who she had a vague memory of.

Is it maybe the grandpa from next door?

She was sure there was no way. She began to pedal faster to catch up with him and make sure.

Once she'd overtaken him, she practically leaped off her bike and whirled around. Standing there, without a shadow of a doubt, was the old man looking just as he did in her childhood memories.

M remembered how she'd wished she had said hello that time in elementary school, but as she watched the old man drawing closer, her mouth stayed clamped shut. It took everything she had to simply force her body to bow as he was on the verge of slipping past her.

The old man smiled and returned her bow before going into the house next door.

He looks so real, just like a regular person. Is this really him, the grandpa who died? Wait. What? It's not even Obon, though? she thought as she stared at the neighbors' front door.

And then the man himself came back out.

Why? she wondered, gaping, only to see the grandmother coming out immediately after him.

Where's she going?

The question had no sooner popped up in M's mind than the elderly couple began to slowly fade out of existence as they walked, disappearing from their heads down.

“Eek!” M shrieked, and flew into her own house in a panic. Watching them vanish before her eyes had scared her half to death.

She told her family about what had happened, but none of them took her seriously.

Ten days later, she heard that the old woman next door had passed away.

Three more years later, M was at her desk studying late one night.

Bing-bong.

The doorbell rang suddenly.

Starting in surprise, M looked up at the clock. It was two thirty in the morning. *There’s no way someone would come over at this hour*, she said to herself, when the doorbell rang again. And again and again.

Bing-bong. Bing-bong. Bing-bong.

She frowned. *Should I answer it? Why isn’t the noise waking anyone up?*

Bing-bong. Bing-bong.

And then she heard a voice from the front entryway.

“Good evening!” a man called.

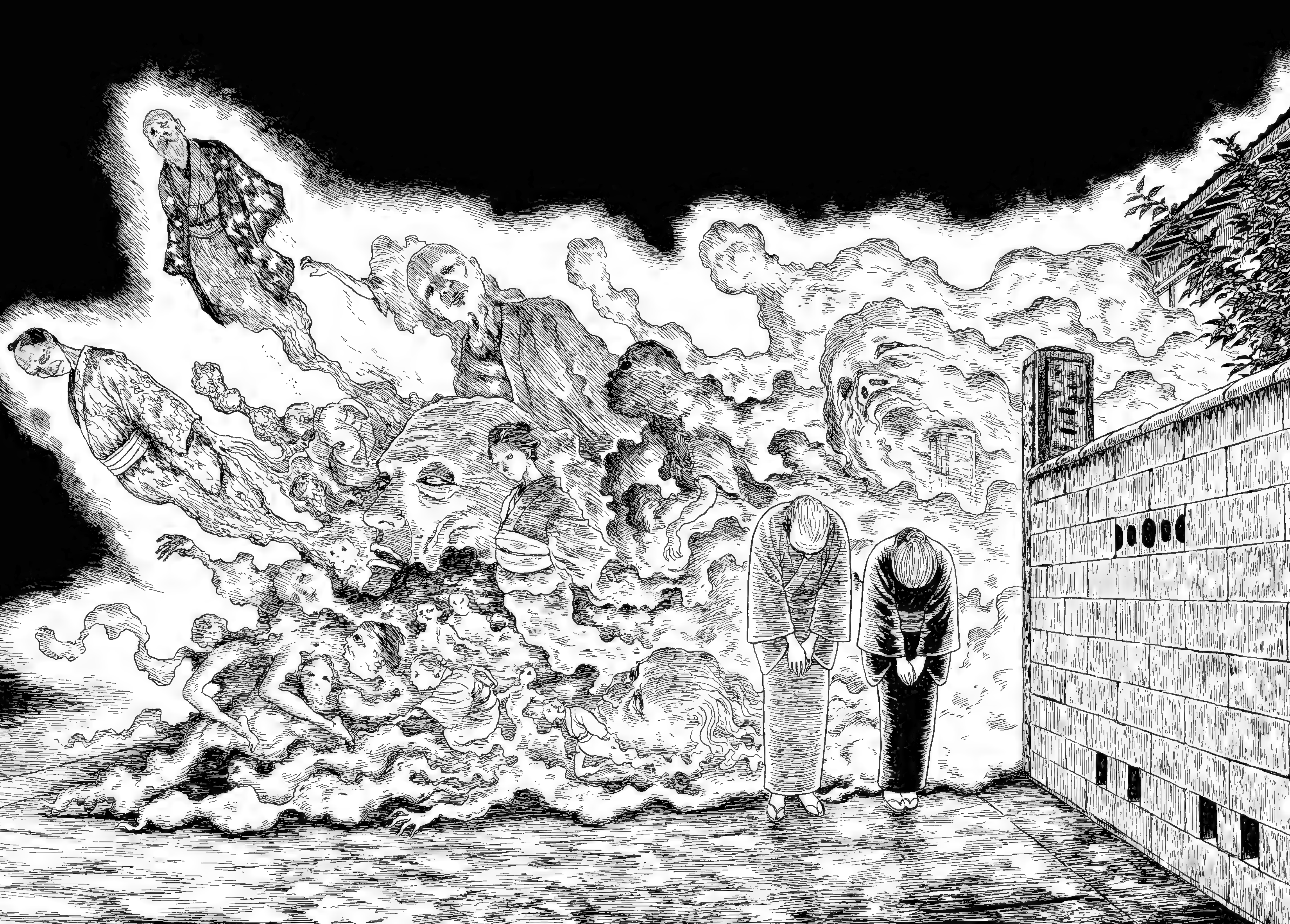
M sighed with relief at the sound of this voice and went to open the front door. She took a step out onto the porch, but there was no one there.

Weird. But why would someone come over just to ring the doorbell in the middle of the night? Someone has to be out here.

When she went and looked outside the gate, she found the old man and the old woman from next door waiting there. She stared at them, stunned.

The elderly couple smiled at her and bowed, while behind them, something like a mass of smoke rose up. This drifted past the bowing couple and transformed into a succession of different people, who then broke away and slid past.

People in kimono; a bearded man in a formal *haori* coat; an old lady stooped over, her back bent; a pair of small children’s feet; a massive head with a topknot like something out of a samurai film—the various forms tore away from the smoky mass and then vanished.



Even after all of these apparitions had disappeared from view, the old man and the old woman continued to bow.

“We’re sorry for the trouble,” they said, finally, before vanishing themselves.

M didn’t really understand what had just happened. She simply went back inside, sat down in front of her desk, and stayed there until morning came.

Ten days later, the house next door caught fire and burned down. Fortunately, the family wasn’t hurt. And strangely, M’s house not only did not catch fire, but was not even so much as singed, despite being immediately next door.

Looking back on it now, M said that she feels like all those apparitions had left the *butsudan* family shrine before the fire burned it.

STITCH 4/END





STITCH 5
The Play





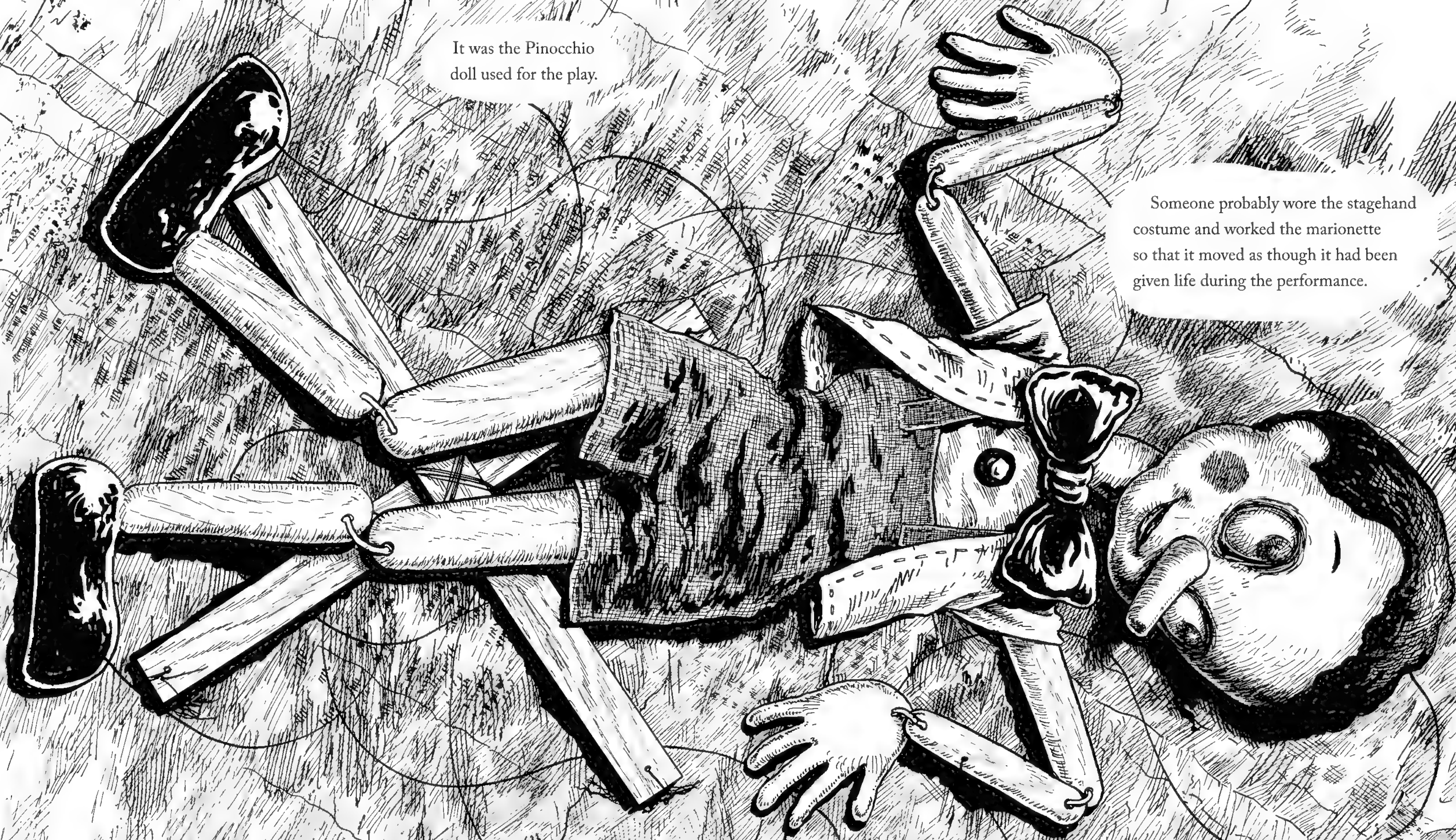
THIS INCIDENT TOOK PLACE when E was in high school, the year the drama club decided to stage a production of *Pinocchio* for the autumn school festival.

E and the other members of the drama club were discussing what show to put on for the theater performance at the festival while they cleaned the club office before the start of summer break.

They found an old box sealed up with layers of tape, buried under a bunch of things in the back of the room. Wondering what could possibly be inside, they opened the box and discovered a mimeographed script with “Pinocchio” written on the cover, a black stagehand costume, and something bundled up in newspaper beneath both of these. They unwrapped the bundle to find a handmade wooden marionette.

It was the Pinocchio doll used for the play.

Someone probably wore the stagehand costume and worked the marionette so that it moved as though it had been given life during the performance.





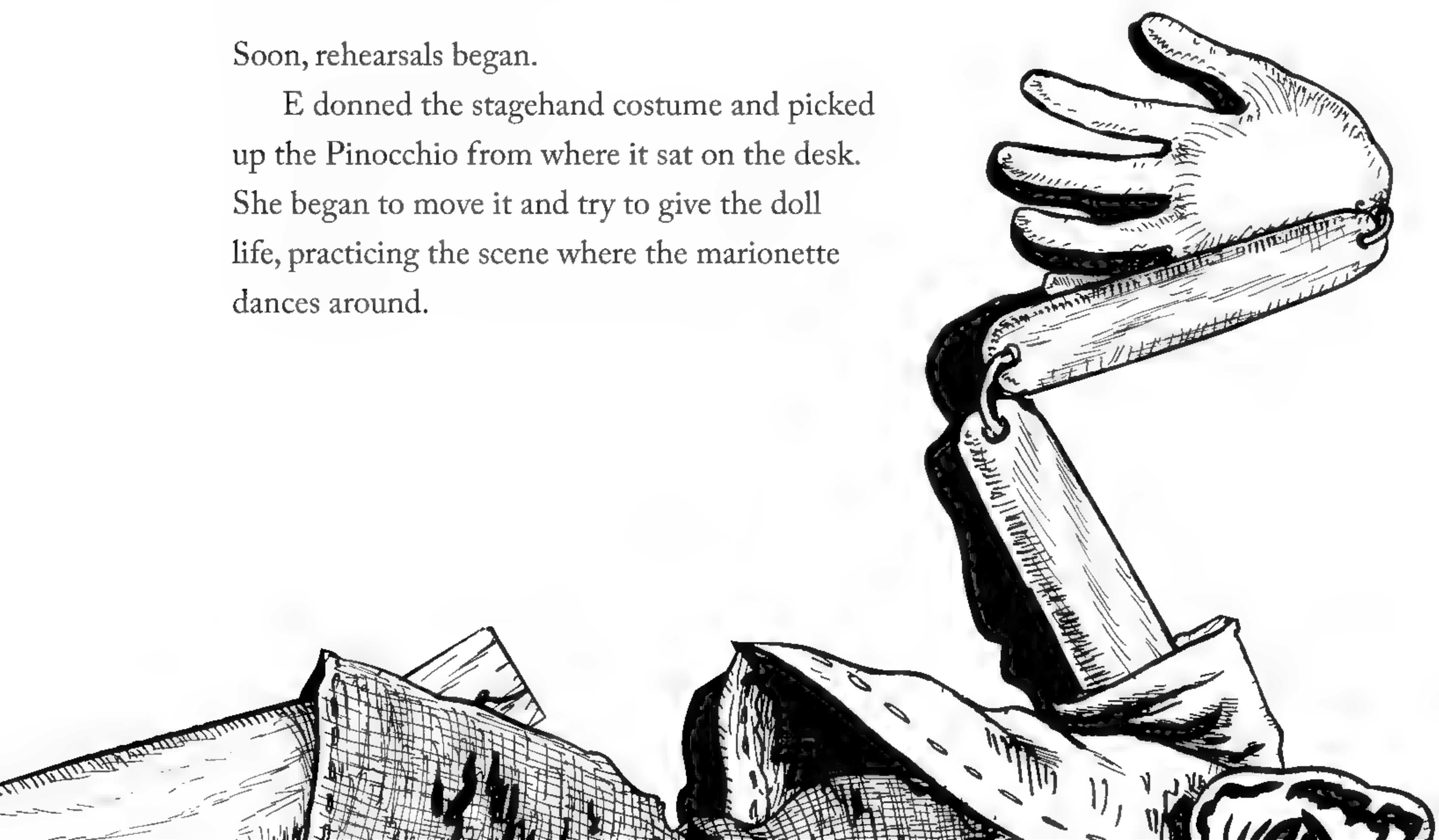
Everyone stopped what they were doing and gathered around the marionette, chatting about how cute it was. As they talked, they naturally came back to the subject of their performance, and eventually they all agreed that they should stage *Pinocchio*.

They had the script, at any rate, so all they really had to do was polish it up a bit, and they'd have something to perform. And now that the matter of what play to put on was settled, they could devote their time to costumes, props, and stage settings.

E ended up with the role of puppeteer. She would wear the kuroko outfit and control the Pinocchio marionette. Although this could have been viewed as a shadow role—since she herself would not be visible to the audience, nor would she deliver a single line of dialogue—she would be stepping onto center stage as Pinocchio, so she was very excited about taking on the role.

Soon, rehearsals began.

E donned the stagehand costume and picked up the Pinocchio from where it sat on the desk. She began to move it and try to give the doll life, practicing the scene where the marionette dances around.



Despite the fact that she'd never operated a marionette before, she was able to give a surprisingly good performance the first time she rehearsed with it. She quickly shifted from one scene to the next: the moment the doll received its soul, movements that gradually went from awkwardly jerky to human, and naturally, the doll's dance to express its joy at its newfound freedom of motion.

Everyone in the drama club was wide-eyed in surprise at how good E was. She had not taken on the challenge of the role lightly, but she was so skilled with the marionette that she even wondered: was she really operating Pinocchio herself?

Eventually, fall came around, summer break ended, and the drama club started to rehearse in earnest for their upcoming performance.

One day, E was the first to arrive at the club office, and was about to unlock the door when she heard a sound from inside.

Tak. Tak.

It looked like someone had beaten her to the office and was already at work rehearsing. But it seemed impossible that anyone could have gotten there before her, since the key she had picked up from the teachers' office was the only one.

Huh? She frowned. *She* had the only key to the office. There was no way there could have been anyone inside.

Wondering at this, E slowly, quietly unlocked the door and slid it open to discover someone dressed in the stagehand outfit, intently making Pinocchio dance about.

"Uh? What are you doing?" she asked, and the black costume fell to the ground, as though the person inside of it had abruptly vanished. The marionette also dropped from where it hung in the air and tumbled to the floor.





E told herself that this was impossible, that it was all in her head, just her imagination. She decided not to mention it to the others.

The day before the school festival, the drama club members were ready for their final dress rehearsal. They got into costume and went to the gym to set everything up on the stage there.

E arrived at the club office a little late, so she was in a hurry to get dressed and head over to the gym herself. But when she opened the box with the stagehand costume, it was empty. She searched the room in a panic, but could find no sign of the outfit. She knew that the other actors would have been preoccupied with their own roles and preparations, so it seemed very unlikely that any of them would have bothered with her costume.

Frowning over this mystery, she headed to the gym where everyone was rehearsing and asked if they had seen her stagehand outfit. They looked at her with wide eyes.

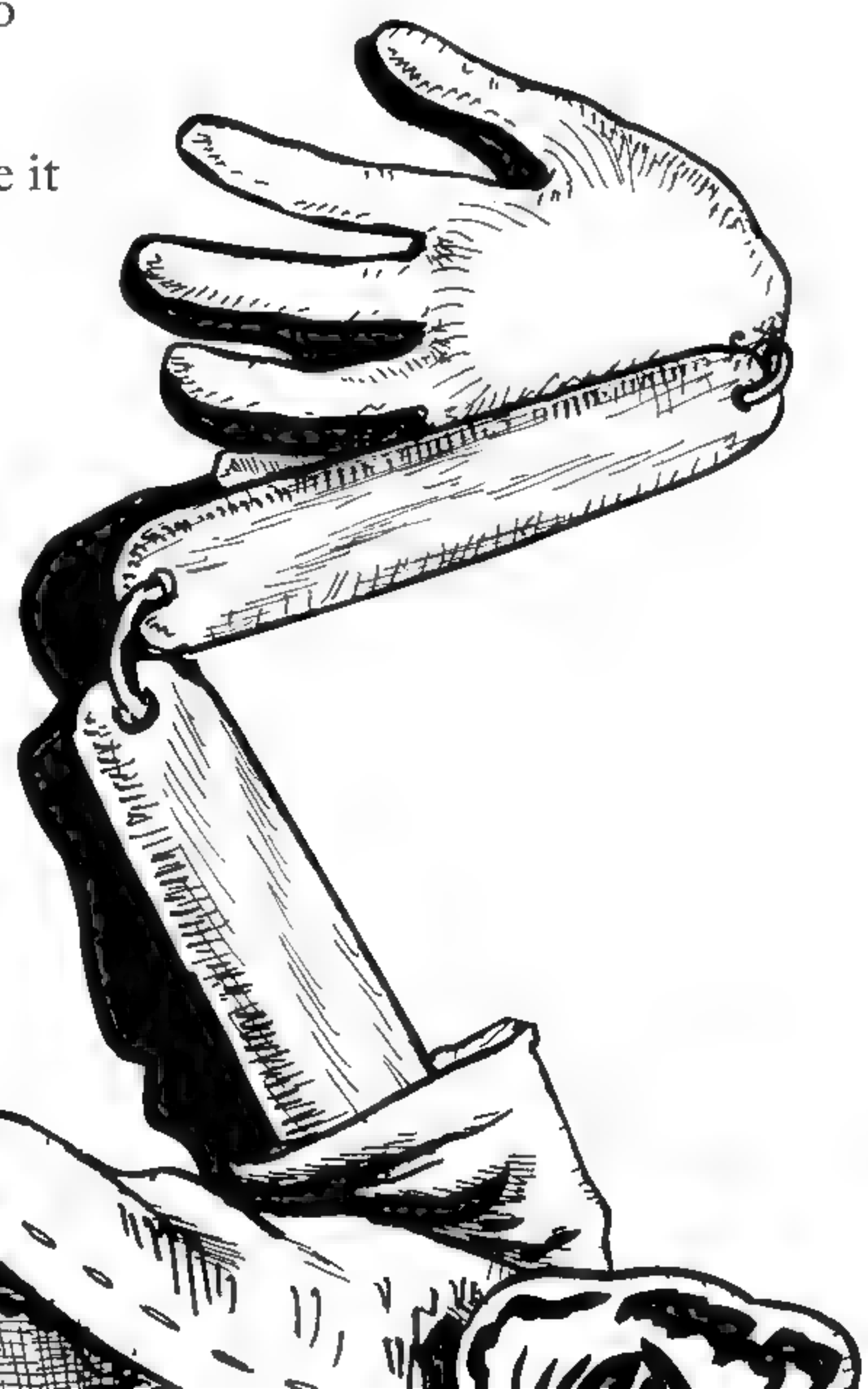
"E, what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" she asked in reply. "What do you mean?"

"Why would you get into costume only to go and take it off again?"

Nothing her fellow cast members were saying made any sense to her. When she pushed them for details, they told her that someone in a kuroko outfit had gone past them to the stage just a minute ago, carrying the Pinocchio marionette.

"That's ridiculous!" she cried out, and marched around to the wings of the stage with the other club members.



There was in fact someone there, practicing with Pinocchio.

“Who are you?” E asked, automatically.

The stagehand outfit crumpled in on itself and dropped to the floor with the marionette.

There was quite a furor after that, but the drama club nevertheless did still stage *Pinocchio* at the festival the following day. After the performance, the others told E that she had been much better during rehearsals.



STITCH 5/END





STITCH 6

Folk Dance



T HAD THIS EXPERIENCE WHILE AT UNIVERSITY. In autumn of one year, his extracurricular club took part in a joint training camp with a similar club from another university.

This was before the digital era, and T was the designated photographer for his university, in charge of recording the training camp. This role meant that he was exempt from routine duties to compensate for those times when he would have to work instead of having fun with the rest of the group. To T, this felt like a pretty big perk.

The group was divided into various teams to make supper, and immediately after supper, they lit the campfire, the training camp's big draw.

They gathered around the large fire and chatted, getting to know each other better. Just when the party was in full swing, the student leaders from each university stepped forward to announce what they had been secretly planning—the group would split off into man-woman pairs for a round of folk dancing, the basic idea being that this would help them grow closer as a group.

“What?”

“No one told us we’d have to do this.”

“Folk dancing at our age?”

Some students protested the idea, but several of the men welcomed the proposal wholeheartedly.

The reason for their delight was the extraordinarily beautiful woman sitting with the other women around the campfire. She had yet to open her mouth and appeared utterly uninterested in talking with anyone.

Every man at the party had been watching for some kind of opening to reach out to her, but she simply sat there, holding her knees to her chest and staring into the fire. She hadn’t even spoken to any of the women, much less the men, so they were all trying to figure out how to approach her, given the stoniness of her presence.

One of the student leaders brought a large cassette player out of the cabin, and the first, somewhat awkward dance began.

Right from the start, T had also been interested in the mystery woman—he’d even been secretly taking pictures of her—so he felt his heart sink when the dancing started, because he would not be joining the circle swinging and swaying around the fire. Instead, he would have to capture the ring of dancers with his camera, the girl among them.

This could’ve been my chance to actually talk with her, he said to himself, sadly.

Apparently, everyone else was thinking the same thing. As his friends slipped past him one after the other, they whispered things like, “You gotta get a shot of me with her,” and “Make sure you snap one of us dancing together.”

With his duties as the photographer as an excuse, T had managed to avoid doing any of the other work required to keep the camp going, but he now regretted taking on this role.

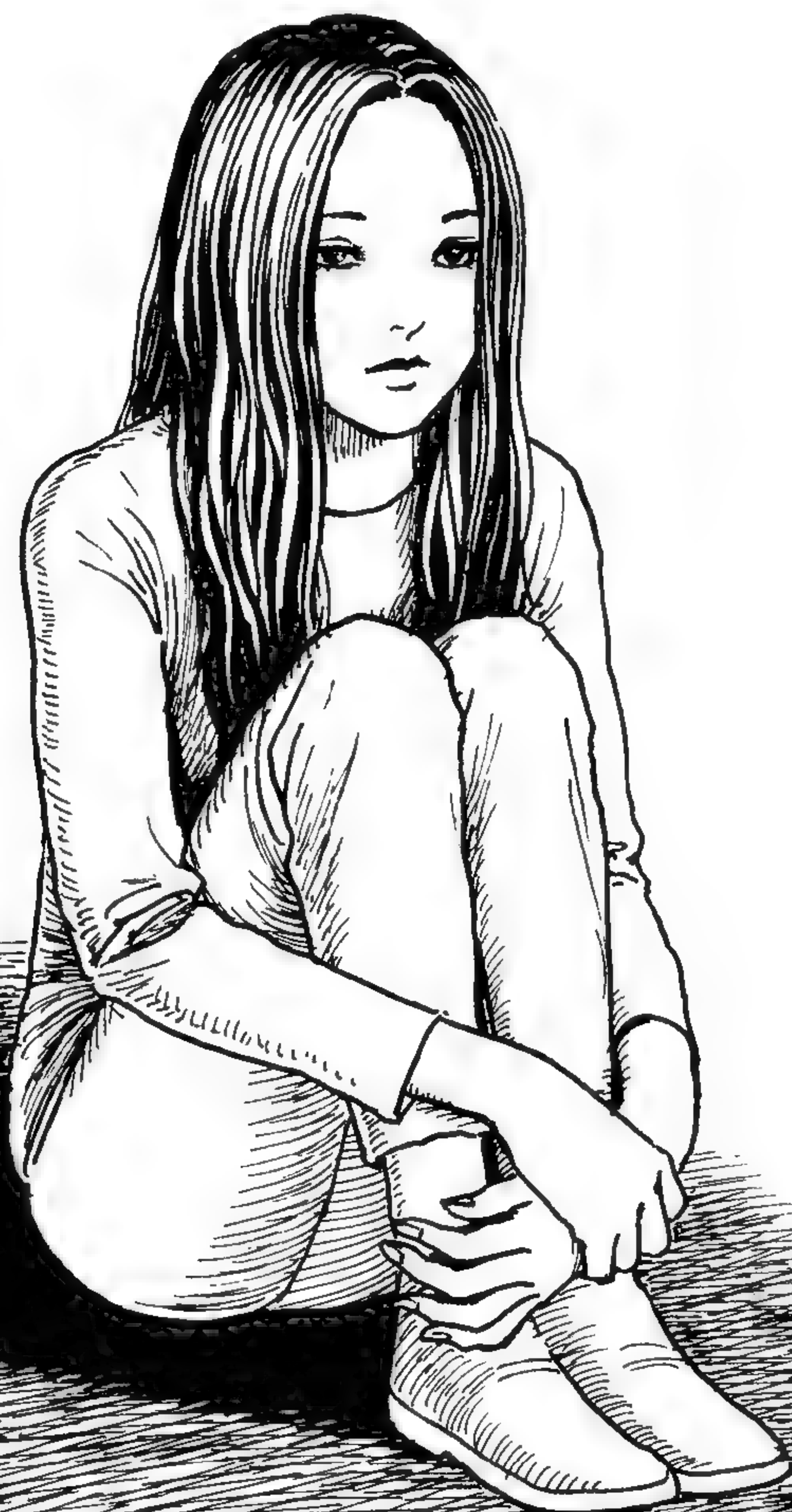
I know!

An excellent idea popped into his head. When the folk dancing was finished, he’d go straight over to her and ask for her name and address under the pretext of sending her some of the photos.




With this thought, his heart suddenly grew light again, and while he made sure to take pictures of everyone else, too, he took shot after shot of the beautiful girl circling the fire.

Every time a song ended, one friend or another would come over to T and check if he'd captured them with the girl. Each time, T gave them the thumbs-up.







When the folk dance ended, he was about to race over to the woman with a note in his hands, but she was gone.

Had she already returned to her cabin? He looked everywhere, but she was nowhere to be found. And he couldn't exactly go around to each and every girl there and ask after her. Plus, she wasn't even a student at his own university—it would be even more out of the question for him to interrogate the group about a girl from a different campus.

Left with no other choice, T gave up for the time being. He figured he could try again to find her once the camp was over and he was sending out the photos.

The camp ended soon enough, and he had a large number of photos to develop and distribute. Since he wasn't the only one who'd been interested in the mystery woman, several of the other men were waiting in the club office for T's prints.

"You'll see them when they're done. Just hold your horses," he told his friends, and began to develop the photos.

One after another, photos he had no memory of taking appeared before his eyes. Several had no one in them, even though he hadn't taken any landscape shots.

"What's with these pictures?" someone cried out.

T abruptly remembered with a gasp—these strange photos of nothing were all shots he'd taken of the beautiful woman by herself.

But she's not in them? How can that be...

He printed one photo after another, eventually reaching the folk-dancing session.

What the hell? What is going on?

One of the men waiting on pictures of the woman shouted.



“I was dancing with her there, but she’s gone!”

They had been dancing in a circle, all packed together, and yet, in photo after photo, there was a human-sized blank space. In every instance, a man had been dancing with the woman, and yet the picture only showed him. There was no one under his outstretched arm, no one holding his other hand hanging in the air in front of him.

In other pictures, where the group had formed a line and placed their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them, there would be one person with their arms stretched out into empty space, as if resting their hands on someone’s shoulders even though there was no one standing there.

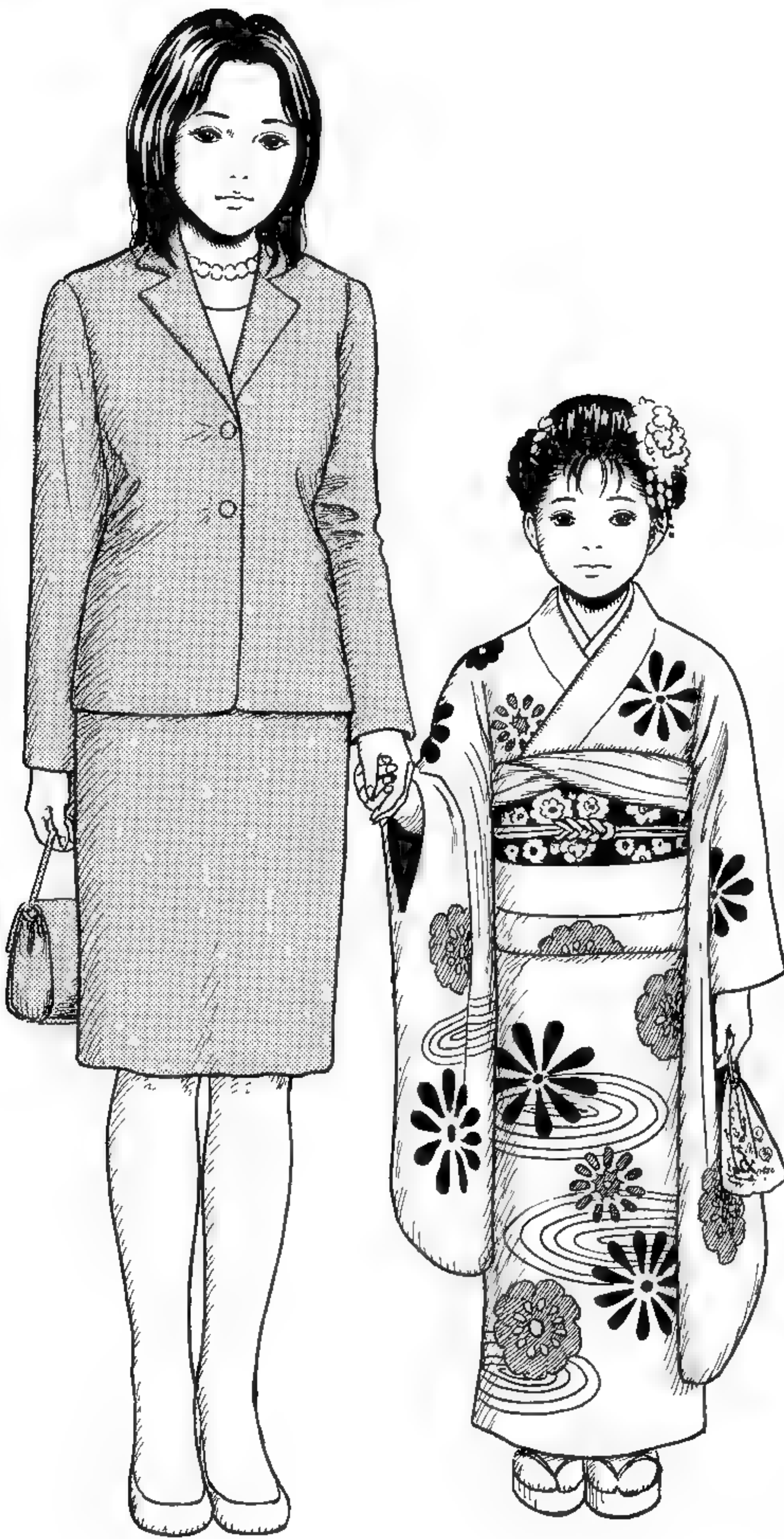
T developed every single photo he’d taken, but not one showed the woman.

Baffled, the male students asked the women in their group and even put in a question to the other university club that had taken part in the camp. But no one knew who the woman was.

T also asked his counterpart at the partner university, but he didn’t have any photos of her either. Naturally, this caused a similar uproar among the men there, too.



STITCH 6/END



THIS HAPPENED THE EVENING BEFORE the Shichi-Go-San children's festival, soon after F's daughter turned seven.

Since the ceremony was the following day, F had her daughter bathe and go to bed earlier than usual. She prepared a drink for her husband, and was having a cup of tea while she waited for him to get home when she heard a voice from the room where her daughter was sleeping.

Strange. She's talking in her sleep quite loudly today.

F smiled to herself, picturing the vivid and entertaining dream her daughter must have been having because of her excitement over Shichi-Go-San.



Before too long, the speaking abruptly became loud laughter.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!”

Is she awake?

F stood up and was about to go look in on her daughter.

“Waaaah!”

Suddenly, she heard a shrieking sob over top of the laughter.

What? Is someone in there?!

She flew into her daughter’s room.

Her daughter was lying on her futon, wailing, while a girl of around the same age was skipping around her, wearing her daughter’s ceremonial *furisode* kimono over her head.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!”

The girl whirled around in great delight, completely ignoring F standing in the doorway staring at her.

“You there! Where did you come from?!”

F was stunned by the sight before her, but she quickly recovered herself and reached out to stop the child. But she only managed to grab hold of the kimono.

Now that the embroidered robe had been yanked from the girl’s head, F could see that the girl was facing away from her and wearing a light *yukata*-style sleeping gown.

Wait. I’ve seen her...

The girl turned around.

Her face was blank. She had no eyes, no nose.

F stepped back reflexively, and bright red lips appeared in the middle of the white face.

"Me too..." the girl said, and vanished.

F was rooted to the spot in surprise until her daughter's cries brought her back to herself with a gasp. She hugged her daughter to her and asked what had happened.

Her daughter told her that the strange girl had shaken her awake after she fell asleep, held up the furisode kimono, and demanded, "Give this to me." She hated the idea of parting with her beautiful new kimono, and so she started to cry.

"You're okay now," F said, as she folded up the kimono and placed it by her daughter's pillow. She laid down next to her and remembered an incident from her own childhood.

She'd had a sister, Natsumi, who was two years younger than her. But Natsumi passed away when she was only five years old.

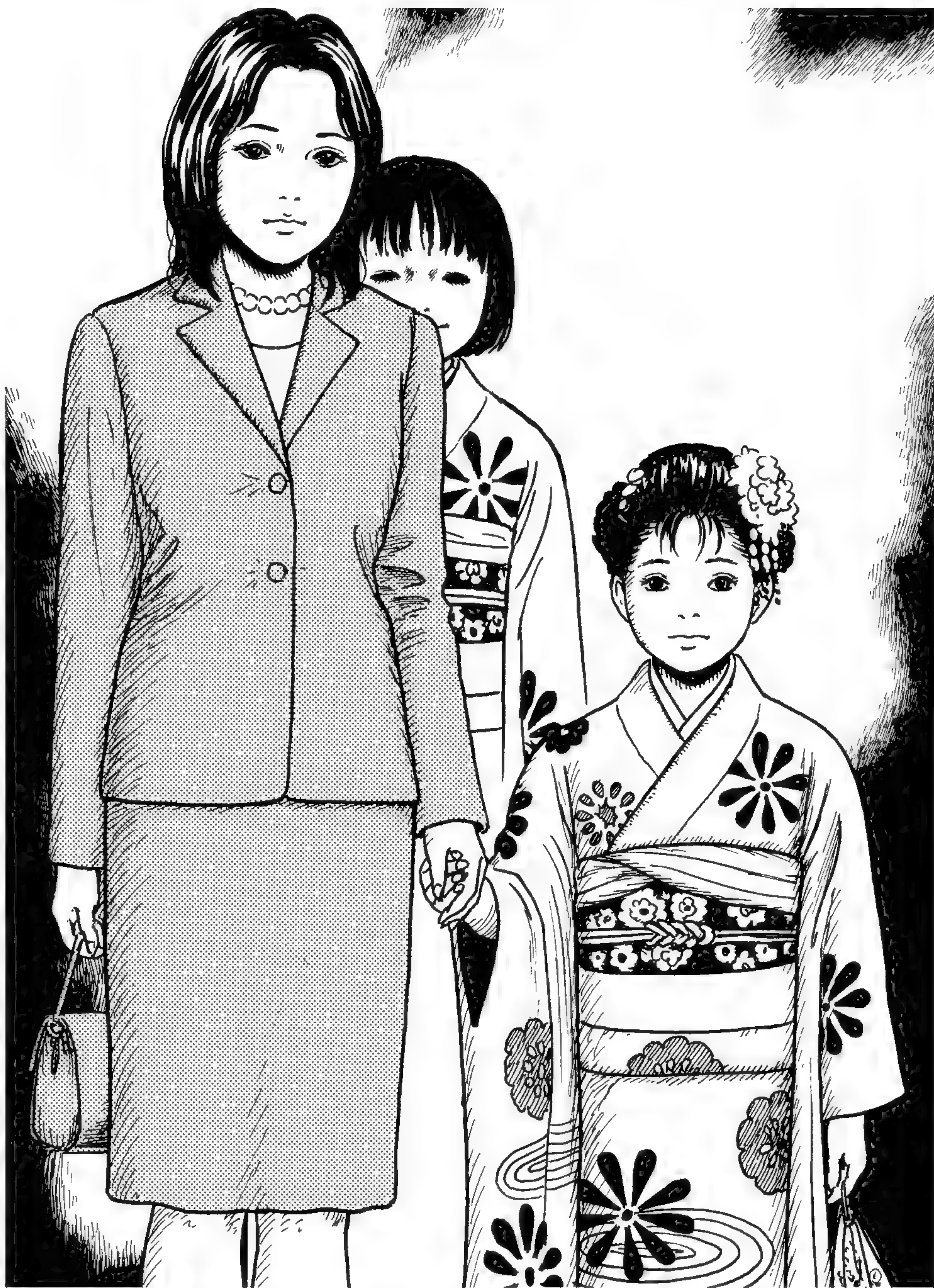
The night before F's own Shichi-Go-San ceremony, after she'd turned seven just like her daughter now, she woke up to the sound of stomping up and down the hallway.

What's going on? she wondered, and then realized that the footsteps didn't belong to her mother or her father.

So then... who's doing that marching?

Suddenly, she heard her mother's footsteps in the hallway. It sounded like she was chasing whoever was out there. "Natsumi! Is that you?!" her mother cried, bursting into tears.

Surprised, F leaped up and went out into the hallway where she found her mother sitting on the floor sobbing and clutching F's furisode kimono.



She didn't understand why her mother was shouting her sister's name or why she was holding F's kimono when it was supposed to be sitting next to F's pillow. But she had the thought that maybe, just maybe, her little sister Natsumi had come back.

Once her daughter had fallen asleep again, F got up.

The kimono was nowhere to be found. She was positive that she had folded it up and set it out next to the futon again before putting her daughter back to bed earlier, but it was gone.

At a loss, F called her mother and told her about what had just happened.

Her mother paused for a long moment, and then said, "I'll call you back," before hanging up.

Minutes later, the phone rang.

F's mother said the furisode kimono had been sitting in front of the *butsudan* altar, the place where the family's dead were memorialized.

"I'll get the car out and bring it to you right away," her mother told her.

"No," F replied. "Leave it there for her until morning."

Her mother laughed, picking up on F's unspoken words. "Well then, I'll let Natsumi do as she pleases."

When the photos from the Shichigosan ceremony were developed, F saw that in between herself and her daughter holding hands, there was the smiling face of a small girl.

STITCH 7/END





STITCH 8

Snow Day

ONE WINTER, TWENTY CENTIMETERS OF SNOW
fell in a single evening, an unusual occurrence in the city.





As S looked out the window on this day, her heart sank. Her house was on the top of a hill. Snow on the ground didn't cause her any problems in the morning when it was fresh, but by the time she came home from school it would be packed down and hardened, and she frequently slipped and fell. When she was small, she would come home with cuts and bruises every day until the hardened snow finally melted.

But now that she was in her final year of high school, S's heart didn't sink simply because she was worried about falling and hurting herself on the hill. She had her university entrance exams coming up, and she desperately wanted to pass them. But the snow on the road home and the physical act of slipping and falling reminded her of the very real possibility of "slipping" on the exams, too.

Just as she'd expected, when she left school, the snow on the sloping road leading up to her house had been packed down by cars and feet so it was as hard as ice.

There's no way I'm slipping on this! I'm not jinxing myself like that!

For the first time in her life, S gave climbing the hill everything she had. She took one cautious step after another along the very edge of the road, where the snow was less packed down.

As she focused intently on the path ahead of her, a pale, bare foot suddenly appeared in her field of view.

Huh? Bare feet?

She automatically lifted her face in surprise. Standing before her was a woman in a flimsy dress, about twenty years old.

S couldn't believe it. It was a winter evening so cold that snow turned to ice, and yet this woman was walking around wearing an outfit meant for the height of summer. And with bare feet, to boot.

Why? Isn't she cold? Where is she going dressed like that?

S found herself rooted to the spot for a moment as all kinds of questions crowded their way into her mind.

She and the woman stared at each other for a time, and then the woman pushed past to continue on her way.

S followed the woman with her eyes. She didn't seem the least bit bothered by the cold—no shivering, no teeth chattering. She simply walked down the hill.

Even when she finally made it back to her house, S couldn't stop thinking about the woman in the dress.

Had she really kept going along that frozen road in the middle of winter with bare feet?

S replayed the scene over and over in her mind, and then realized something strange. Obviously, the woman's outfit and her bare feet were quite odd. But her feet also hadn't made any sound as she walked up to S and then passed her.

That road was basically frozen with snow. Every step S took had been accompanied by a slight crunching noise. And although she could remember the sound her own feet made, she couldn't recall the woman's feet making any noise at all.

Sure are some weirdos out there, huh...

With that thought, she sat down at her desk and turned her mind to her studies.

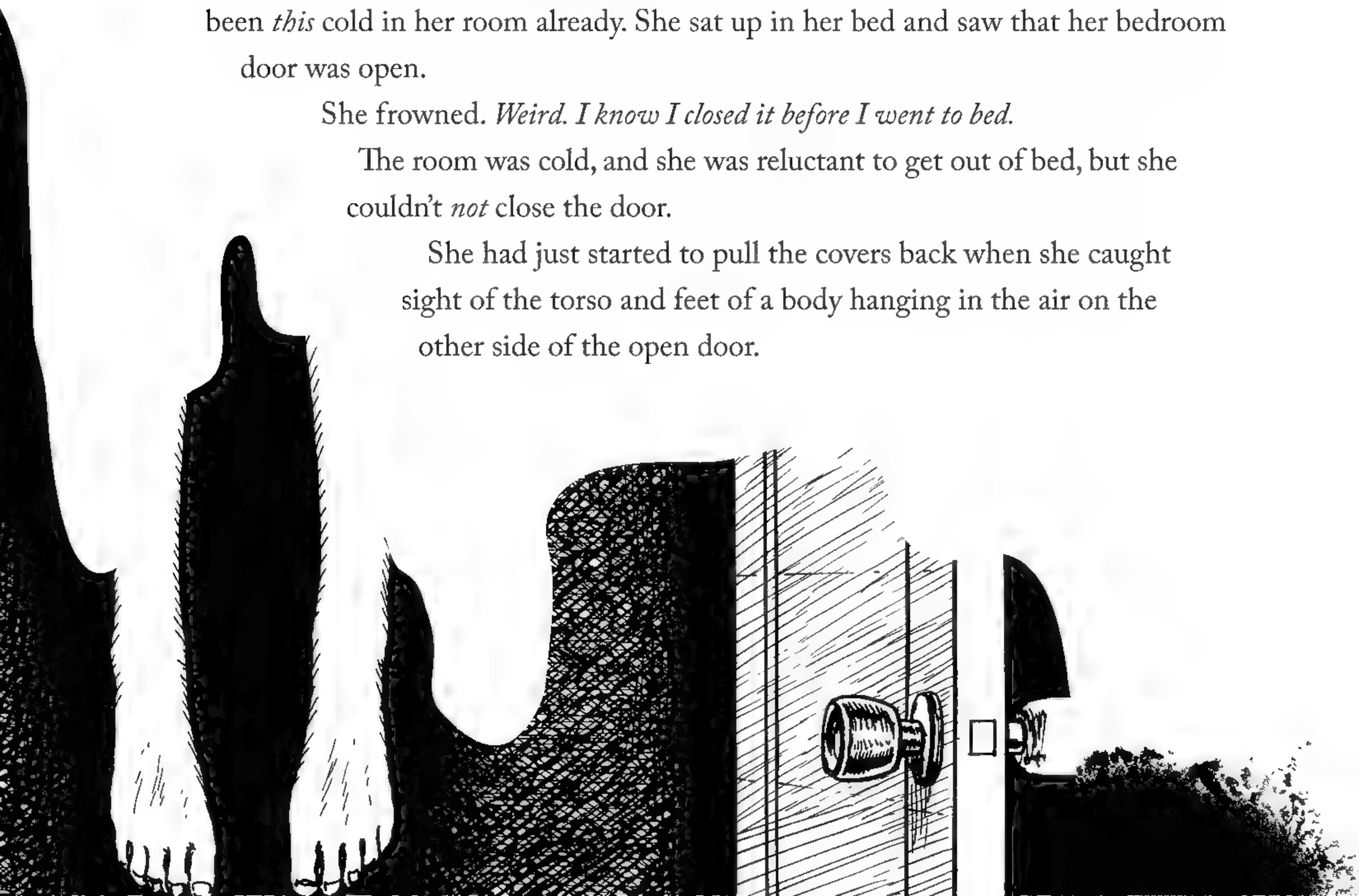
Late that night, she set her books aside and went to bed. But as she slept, she felt a chill and opened her eyes with a gasp.

She had turned the heater off before she went to sleep, but it shouldn't have been *this* cold in her room already. She sat up in her bed and saw that her bedroom door was open.

She frowned. *Weird. I know I closed it before I went to bed.*

The room was cold, and she was reluctant to get out of bed, but she couldn't *not* close the door.

She had just started to pull the covers back when she caught sight of the torso and feet of a body hanging in the air on the other side of the open door.



It looked almost as though someone had hanged themselves in the hallway.

The second S noticed this body, she froze in place, unable to move even a muscle.

Who's there?!

As if waiting for this internal cry, the hanging feet in the passage began to approach the room to enter it, still floating in the air. The feet came up to the doorway, slipped through the wall between the top of the door and the ceiling, and entered the room.

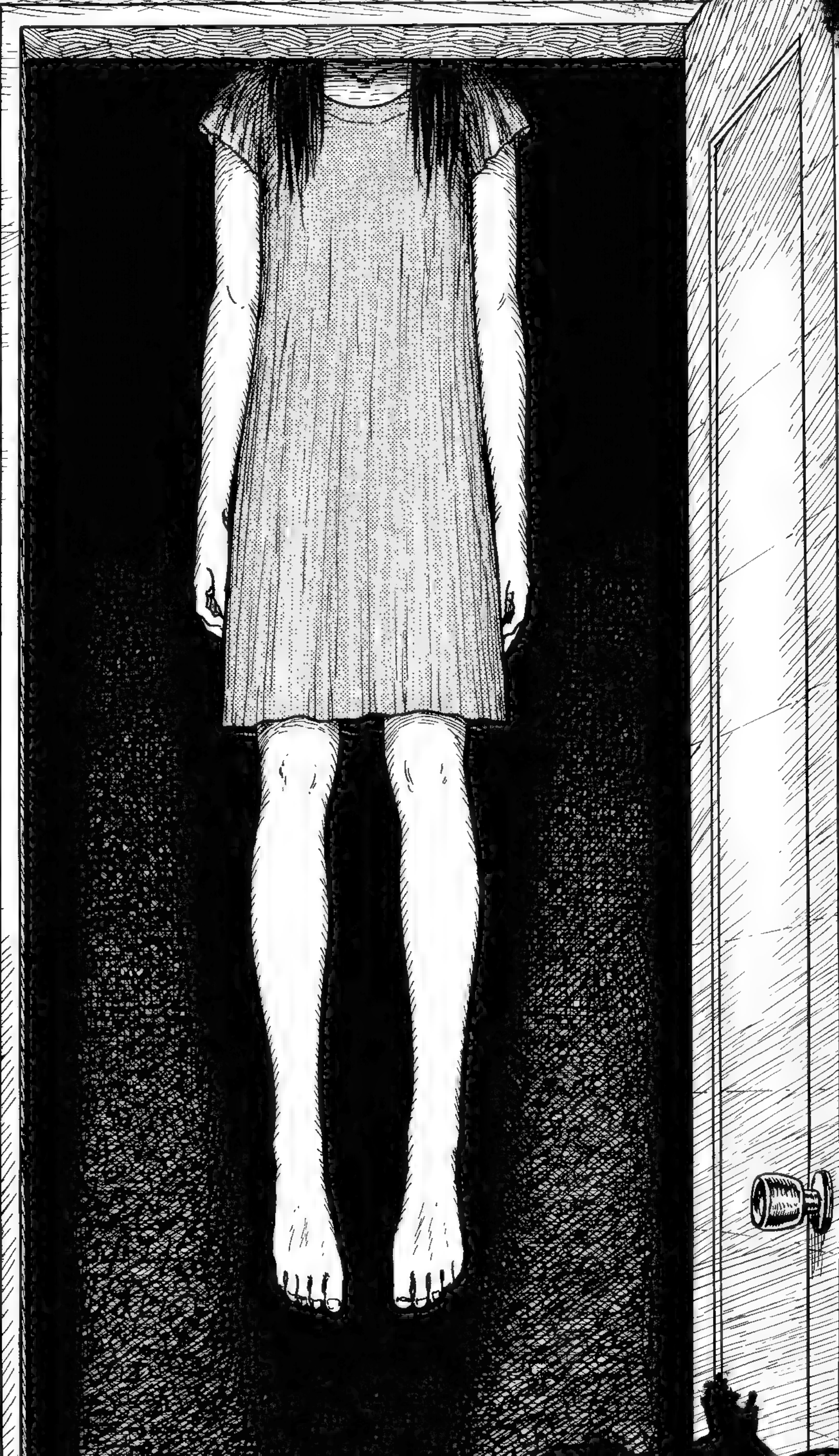
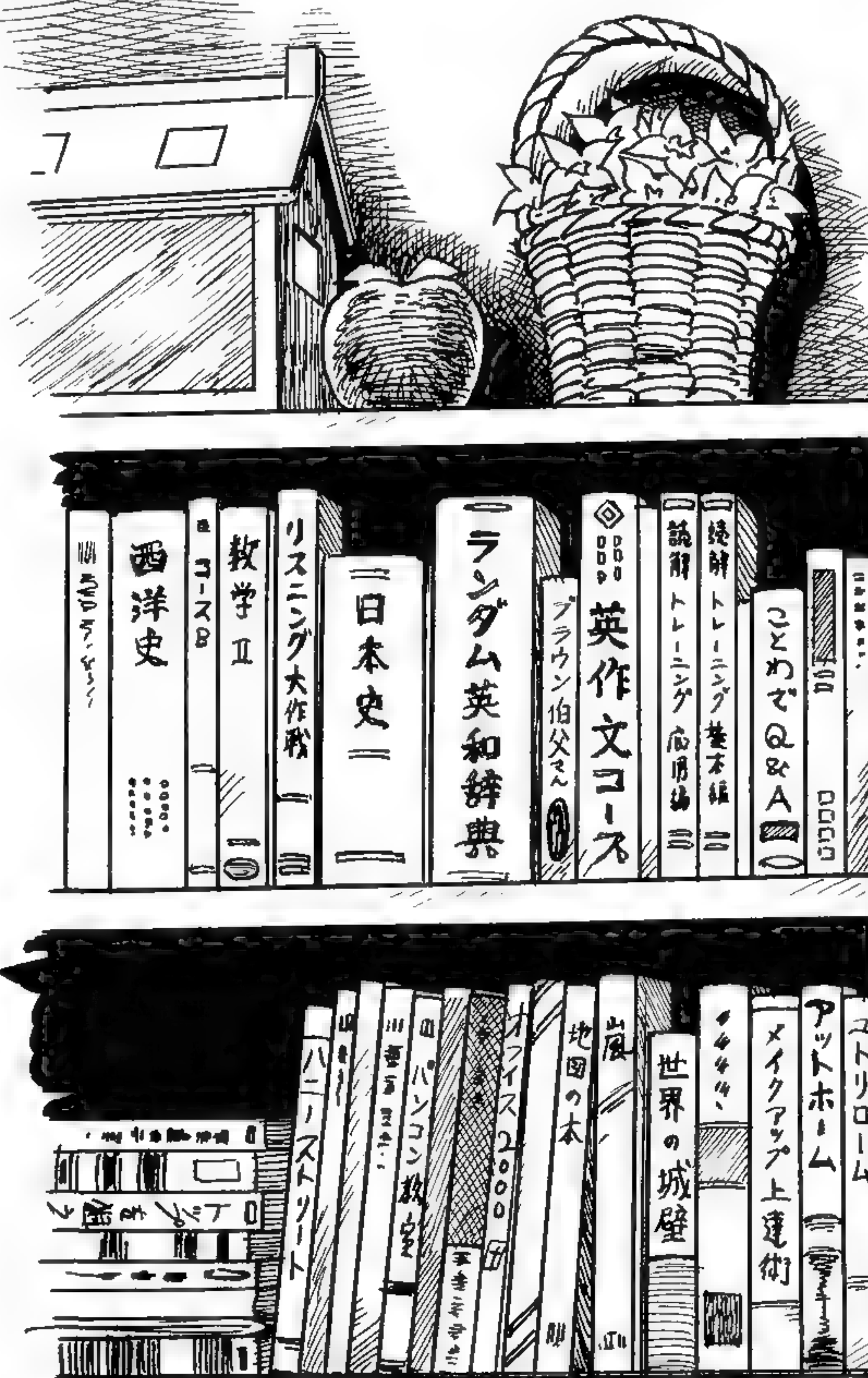
It was the woman in the dress S had passed earlier that evening!

She moved, the rope stretching out from her neck still attached to the ceiling.

The woman drew steadily closer until, finally, she stopped in front of S, who was paralyzed in bed.

Hanging before her eyes were pale, bare feet.

On the verge of fainting, S fell back onto her bed, and met the gaze of the woman looking down on her from above.



S gasped at the terrible cold. The woman hanging from the ceiling was gone.

It must have been a dream, she said to herself, as she sat up in bed.

But the door was still open, just like it had been in her dream. And a terribly cold wind was blowing into her room.

The window also should have been closed, but when she looked to her side, she found that it was open, and the curtains were fluttering in the breeze.

STITCH 8/END



FINAL STITCH
Lips



THIS IS AN INCIDENT from when
N was in third grade.

She woke up one morning, looked over
to one side, and realized that her armoire was
different from usual.

The deep brown, double-doored wooden
face now had a big blank space right in the
middle.

What's that?

N moved closer and saw that a large piece
of white paper had been pasted in the center
of the armoire.

But with this here, I can't open the doors...

She drew even closer to the armoire and
found that the paper had a roughness to it.

*Hub? This is shoji
paper for sliding doors.*

*There's shoji paper
pasted onto the armoire.*

However, when she examined it carefully,
she saw that it wasn't pasted on. It looked more
like the surface of the armoire had been cut
away to reveal this white space beneath it.

When she'd gone to bed the night before,
the armoire had definitely been the same as it
always was. So maybe someone had come in
and done something to it while she was asleep?

That didn't make any sense, either, because
there was no vertical split on the paper where
the double doors would open.

While she stared at it in a daze, a black spot
appeared in the center of this white paper.

What's happening now? she wondered, as the spot grew larger and took on the form of inky black lips.

Lips? Those are lips, right? Why would lips...?

Baffled, she brought her face in even closer and gasped.

They had a shadow.

The lips had oozed across the paper like an inkblot, and now they swelled up to take on a three-dimensional form.

N felt goose bumps break out all over her body.

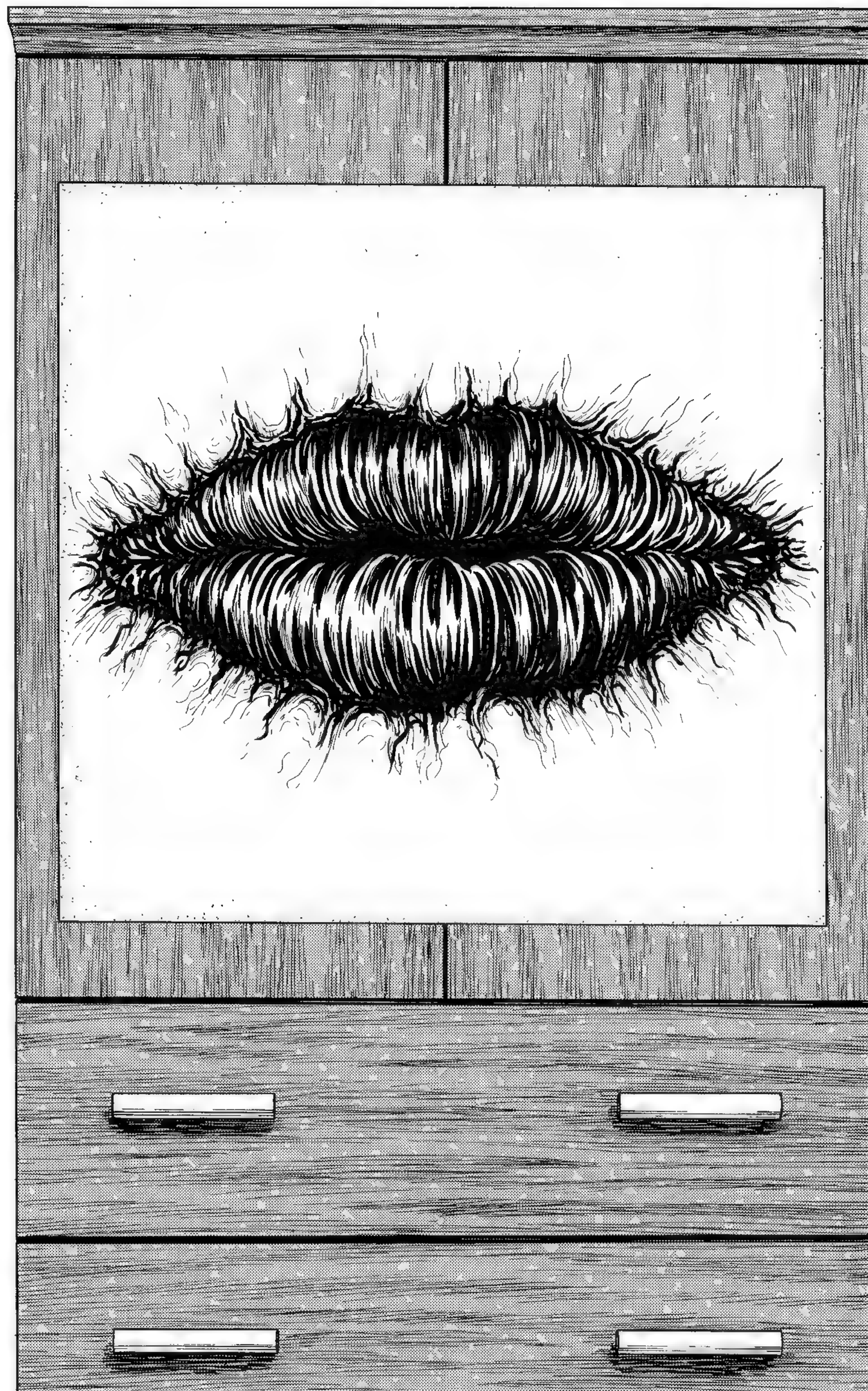
"Hurry and get up, N!" her mother called suddenly from the kitchen. "It's time for breakfast!"

N started at the sound of her voice, and then hurried out to tell her mother what she'd just seen. But her mother wouldn't take her seriously.

She ate her breakfast faster than usual and went back to the armoire, only to find that it had returned to normal.

No way! Where'd the paper and the lips go?

She cocked her head curiously to one side, but the armoire was the same old piece of furniture as always, so she headed off to school.



Then, one evening a little while later, she came home to find the white paper was pasted on the armoire again.

This time, though, she hadn't just gotten up. She was wide awake.

So it wasn't all in my head.

Mustering her courage, she touched the paper. It didn't only look like shoji paper, it felt exactly the same, too.

So it *was* paper. Not wood. What was going on with this armoire?

She stared at it, frowning, as the black spot rose up and took the shape of lips again.

The lips looked very much like an ink painting. Just like last time, they swelled up before her eyes into large, plump, luscious lips.

And just like last time, she immediately got goose bumps all over.

What if these lips have something incredible to say? N thought, and decided to step back from the bureau and watch.

But the plump lips did nothing other than exist.

Before long, her fear faded and was replaced by a desire to touch the lips and find out how they felt.



*They won't bite me or
anything, right?*

She stretched a
hand out.

Just then, she heard
her mother's voice
from the kitchen.
"What are you doing?
If you're home, come
help me!"

She glanced in the
direction of the kitchen
and then turned her eyes
back to the armoire.

The lips were opening.



Inside was an even deeper black, like pure darkness.

“Eeaah!” N shrieked, and fled to the kitchen.

But when she peered at the armoire from the kitchen, it had once again returned to its usual self.

She saw the lips on the armoire any number of times after that, but they never opened again.

She said that when her family moved away from that apartment, the lips stopped appearing on the armoire.

STITCHES/END

AFTERWORD

How did you like *Stitches*, this book of illustrated stories set in the format of a volume of manga? The collection includes the stories that were published monthly from the first issue of *Monthly Shonen Sunday Get the Sun*, released in May 2009 through the February 2010 issue, in addition to twenty-two pages of a special one-shot manga by Junji Ito from the August 2010 issue to celebrate the publication of this work.

Just like the strange tales it collects, this book came into existence through some mysterious connections.

For the original impetus, we have to go back three years to an article in the special edition of *Big Comic Spirits*, released August 15, 2007. I was asked to sit down with Tobira Oda, the author of *Danchi Tomoo* and a huge fan of my book *Shin Mimibukuro*, for a discussion called “Danchi Kaidan” (Apartment Complex Mysteries), which was part of a full-color special on Oda the magazine was running.

Oda’s editor at the time and the person in charge of this project was M, who later became my own editor at *Get the Sun*. Additionally, the manga that followed my conversation with Oda in the pages of the magazine was the first chapter of Junji Ito’s new series, *Black Paradox*.

Illustrator, editor, writer... When I think about how the happy team from the launch of *Get the Sun* had actually been surreptitiously assembled in the opening pages of *Big Comic Spirits* two years earlier, I do actually feel a curious sort of fate binding us together.

There had been special editions of *Shonen Sunday* before, but a monthly *Shonen Sunday* seemed unlikely. However, for the illustrious founding issue of this new monthly magazine, the aforementioned M came to me with an extremely welcome request to run a



series of strange stories, something a little off-kilter from the usual fare. The inaugural issue of *Get the Sun* was also a sort of celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of *Weekly Shonen Sunday*.

M was ready to commission these scary stories from me, but there was still the issue of how to present them to the readers. M's vision was not yet finalized.

And that's where I came up with the idea of illustrated stories.

I'm sure that many readers are of a younger generation and unaware of this fact, but for a period after its launch, *Weekly Shonen Sunday* devoted almost as many pages to prose stories as to manga (because of the format of other monthly magazines, and issues with mass production of manga).

That said, however, they couldn't exactly have pages of nothing but text in a manga magazine aimed at an audience of children. This is where the illustrated stories came in, written by a magnificent army of illustrators such as Hideo Nakamura, Gojin Ishihara, and Shigeru Komatsuzaki. (Those illustrated stories were about pro wrestling heroes all the time, though.)

Although I was very young at the time, I still remember even now the appeal of these stories, with images more powerful than photographs. This was what I wanted to do.

As soon as we landed on this concept of the illustrated story that had graced the pages of the magazine fifty years earlier, we both realized that the whole project would rest on the visual appeal of the illustrations.

So then who could we ask to illustrate the stories for us? M and I both knew the answer to that question, too.

It had to be Junji Ito.

I had been in touch with Ito even before that special edition of *Big Comic Spirits* because he adapted my book *Shin Mimibukuro* into a manga titled *Mimi's Tales of Terror*. I was well aware of his sensibility and the power of his drawings. I reached out to him once again, and he very graciously agreed to tackle *Stitches*.

Strange stories, strange illustrations. M came up with the strange title of *Kai, Sasu* (the original Japanese title of *Stitches*), based on this concept of stitching the two together.

As the first issue of the new magazine was coming together thanks to these many curious connections, I traveled to Europe of all places to do some research. I toured England, Ireland, and Germany before arriving at my final destination of Paris, France.



It was May 16.

Musing on the fact that *Get the Sun* had been published four days earlier in Japan, I stopped by the Paris branch of a certain bookshop near the Paris Opera to do a little market research to complement the rest of my research. And there, in a scene like something straight out of a movie, I came face-to-face with the inaugural issue of *Get the Sun*.

I immediately marched to the register with it, but the encounter was so dramatic, I was unable to bring myself to cut the twine bind-

ing it closed right away. So the first time I laid eyes on Ito's magnificent illustrations was when I was waiting in line directly beneath the Eiffel Tower. (This is a picture from that moment.)

I'm a bit embarrassed to admit it, but I never dreamed I would make such incredible connections or have such dramatic encounters as I celebrated the twentieth anniversary of my scary-story debut in 2010.

I want to take this opportunity to thank from the bottom of my heart my editor M for giving me the chance to enjoy this drama and this book, and Junji Ito for accepting my request—despite the fact that he is impossibly busy—and for depicting a fear that is indescribable in words through his art. I would also like to thank Tobira Oda for unknowingly acting as a matchmaker.

And naturally, you who picked up this book and even bought it! I also want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to you.

Finally, all the people who shared the curious experiences collected in this book. Thank you so much.

Here's hoping we have another dramatic encounter!

—HIROKATSU KIHARA,
Mystery Collector

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

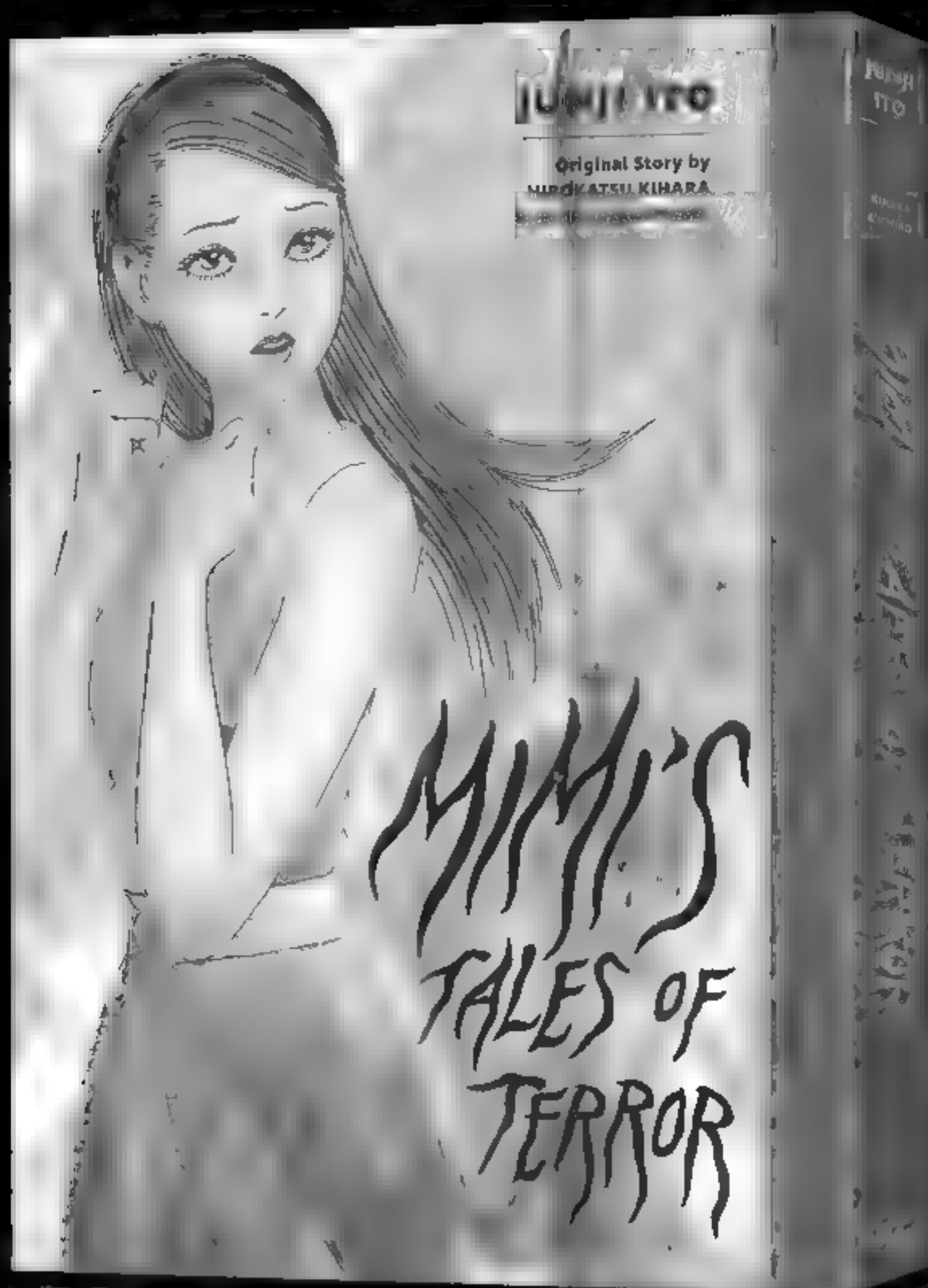
HIROKATSU KIHARA

Born in Hyogo Prefecture, Kihara considers himself a collector of mysteries. He is best known for the famed compendium of urban legends and ghost stories *Shin Mimibukuro* (New Earmuffs), cowritten with Ichiro Nakayama. He also performs as a host at various Japanese culture events celebrating anime, kaiju, and toys. His other works include the series *Tsukumo Kaidan* (99 Ghost Stories) and *Tonari no Kai* (Monster Next Door).

JUNJI ITO

Junji Ito made his professional manga debut in 1987 and since then has gone on to be recognized as one of the greatest contemporary artists working in the horror genre. His titles include *Tomie* and *Uzumaki*, which have been adapted into live-action films; *Gyo*, which was adapted into an animated film. He is a four-time Eisner Award winner. In 2019 his collection *Frankenstein* won in the "Best Adaptation from Another Medium" category, and in 2021 he was awarded "Best Writer/Artist," while *Remina* received the award for "Best U.S. Edition of International Material (Asia)." He also won his second "Best U.S. Edition" for *Lovesickness* in 2022.

ALSO FROM THE AUTHORS



MIMI'S TALES OF TERROR

Original Story by Hirokatsu Kihara
and Ichiro Nakayama

Manga Adaptation and Art by Junji Ito

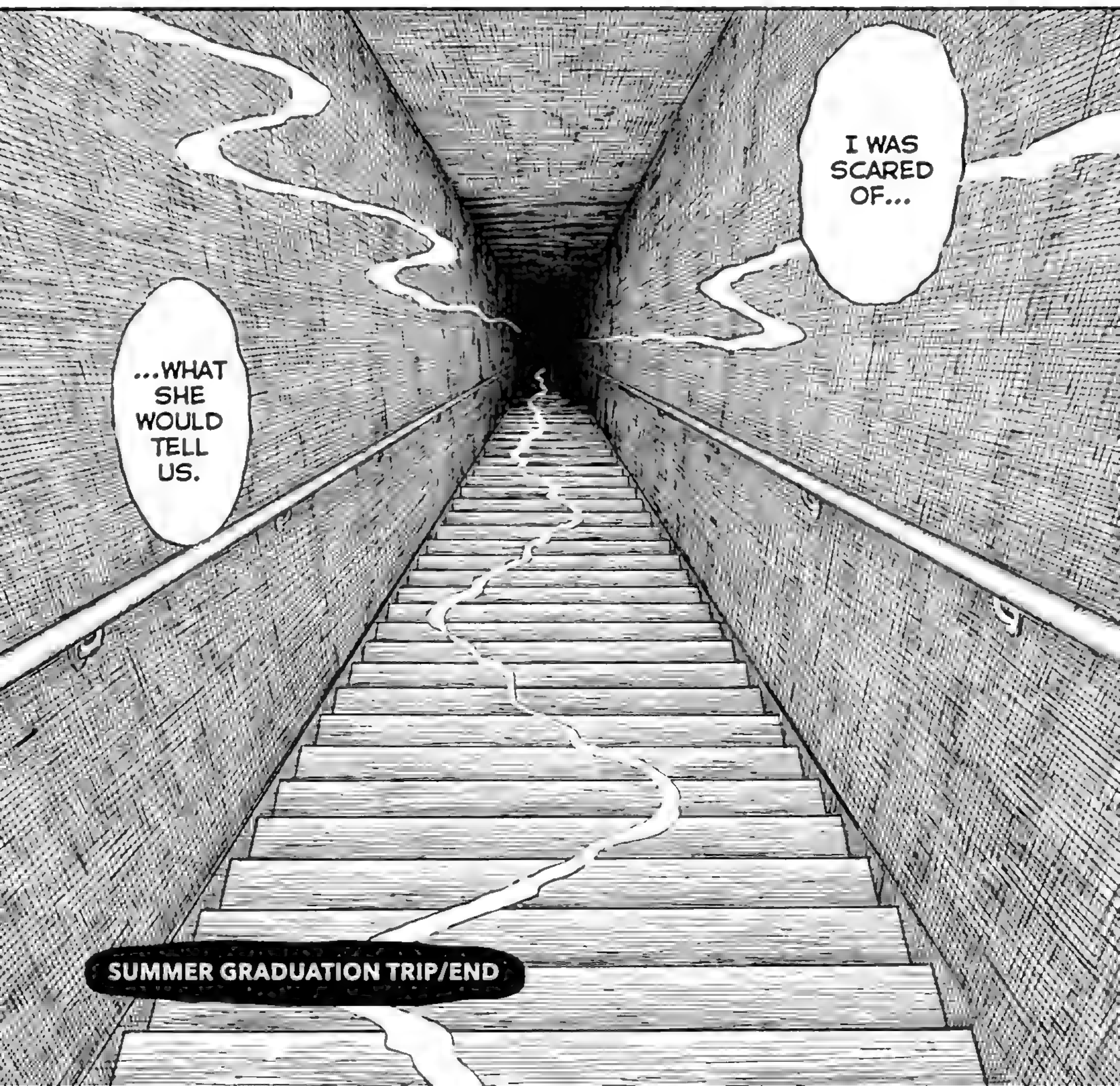
University student Mimi and her boyfriend Naoto encounter one chilling mystery after another. There's the enigmatic neighbor woman dressed in black from head to toe—but if she's so odd, why does it seem like there are many others like her? Then, whose eyes track Mimi's movements from the cemetery next door? And why does a bizarre red circle drawn on a basement wall change with each passing day?

Nine scary stories that really happened, drawn from the famed collection of urban legends *Shin Mimibukuro* (New Earmuffs), and adapted into manga by horror genius Junji Ito.

STOP.

You have reached the end of the story section.

Turn the book to the back to read
the bonus manga by Junji Ito.



SUMMER GRADUATION TRIP/END



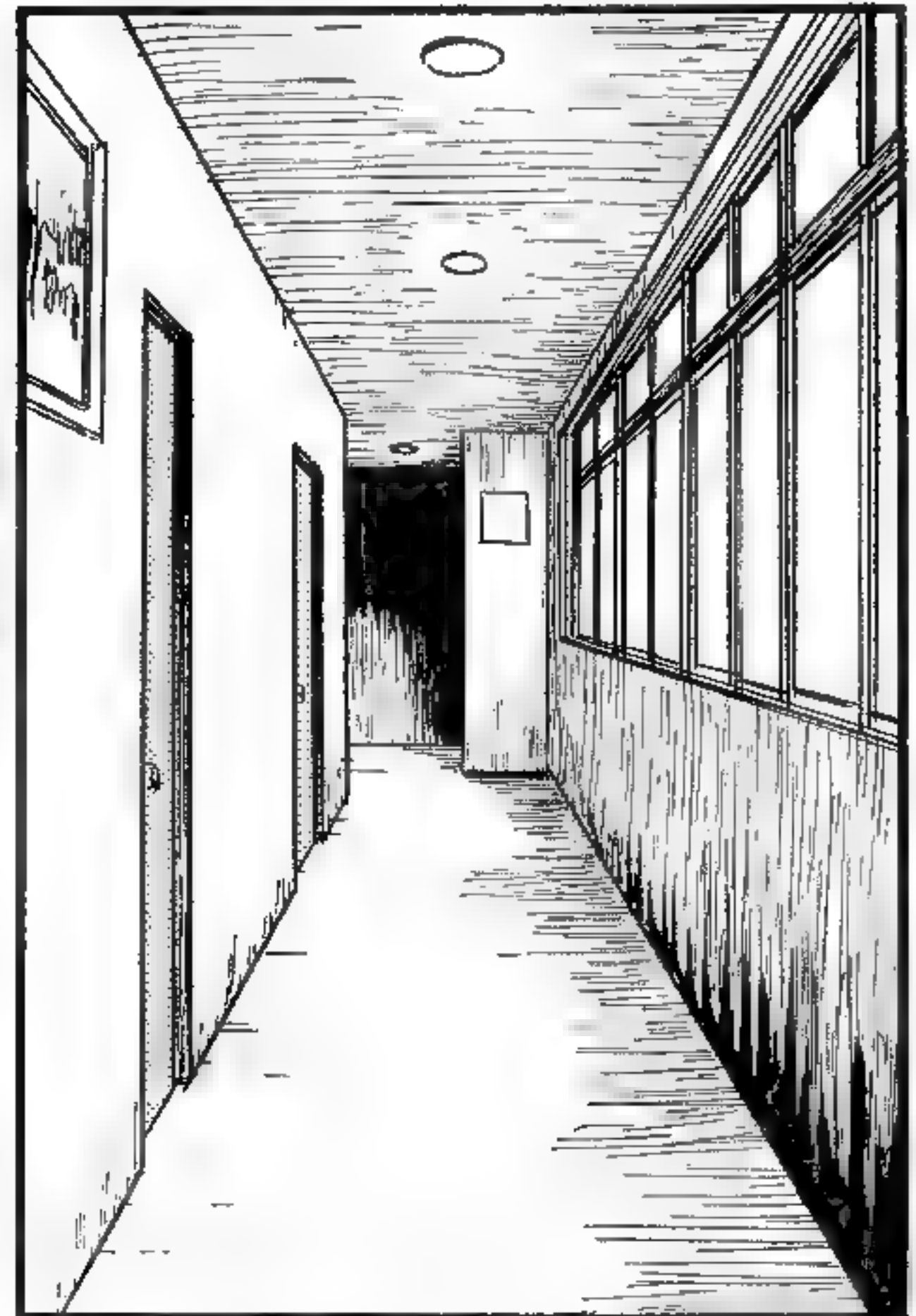
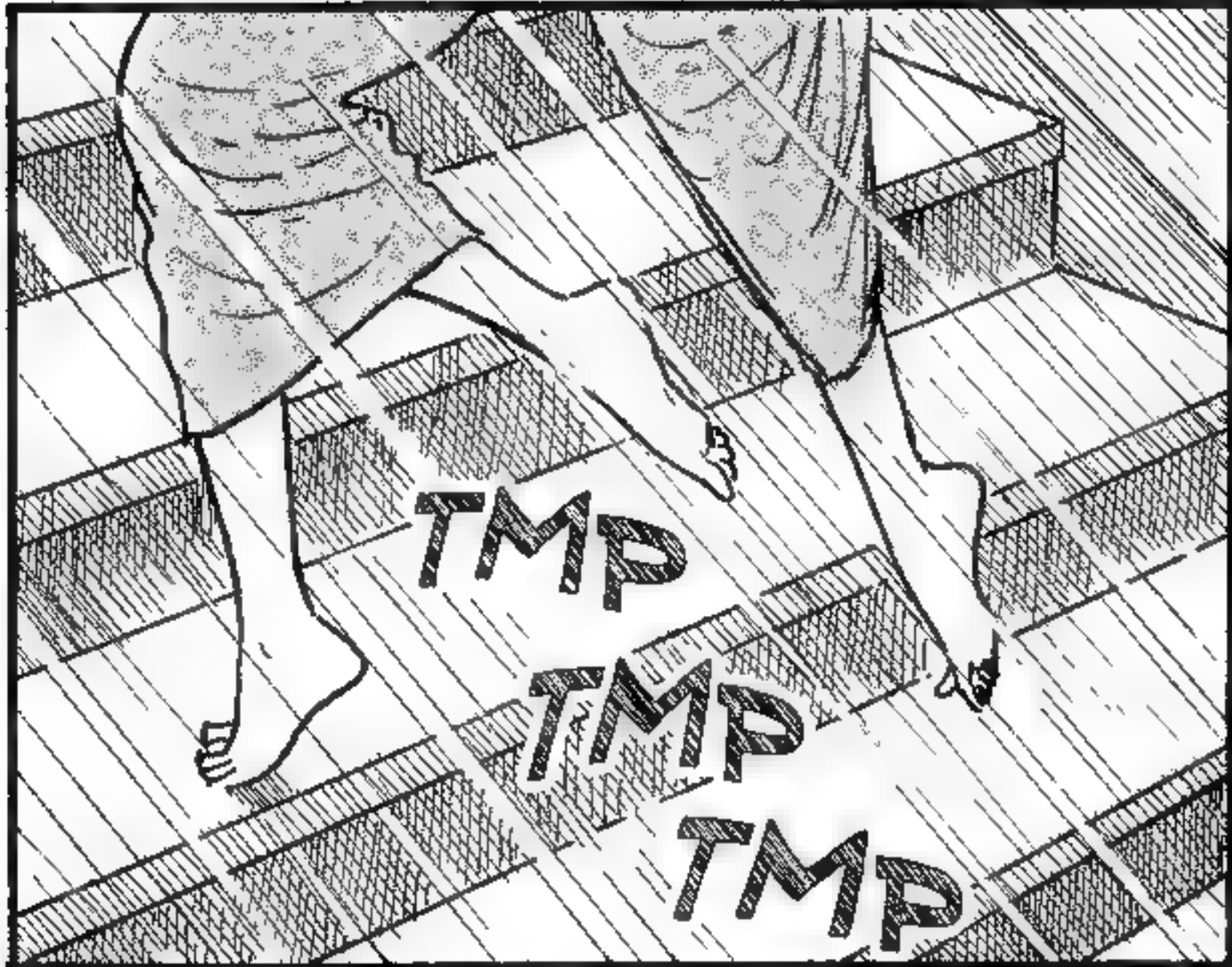
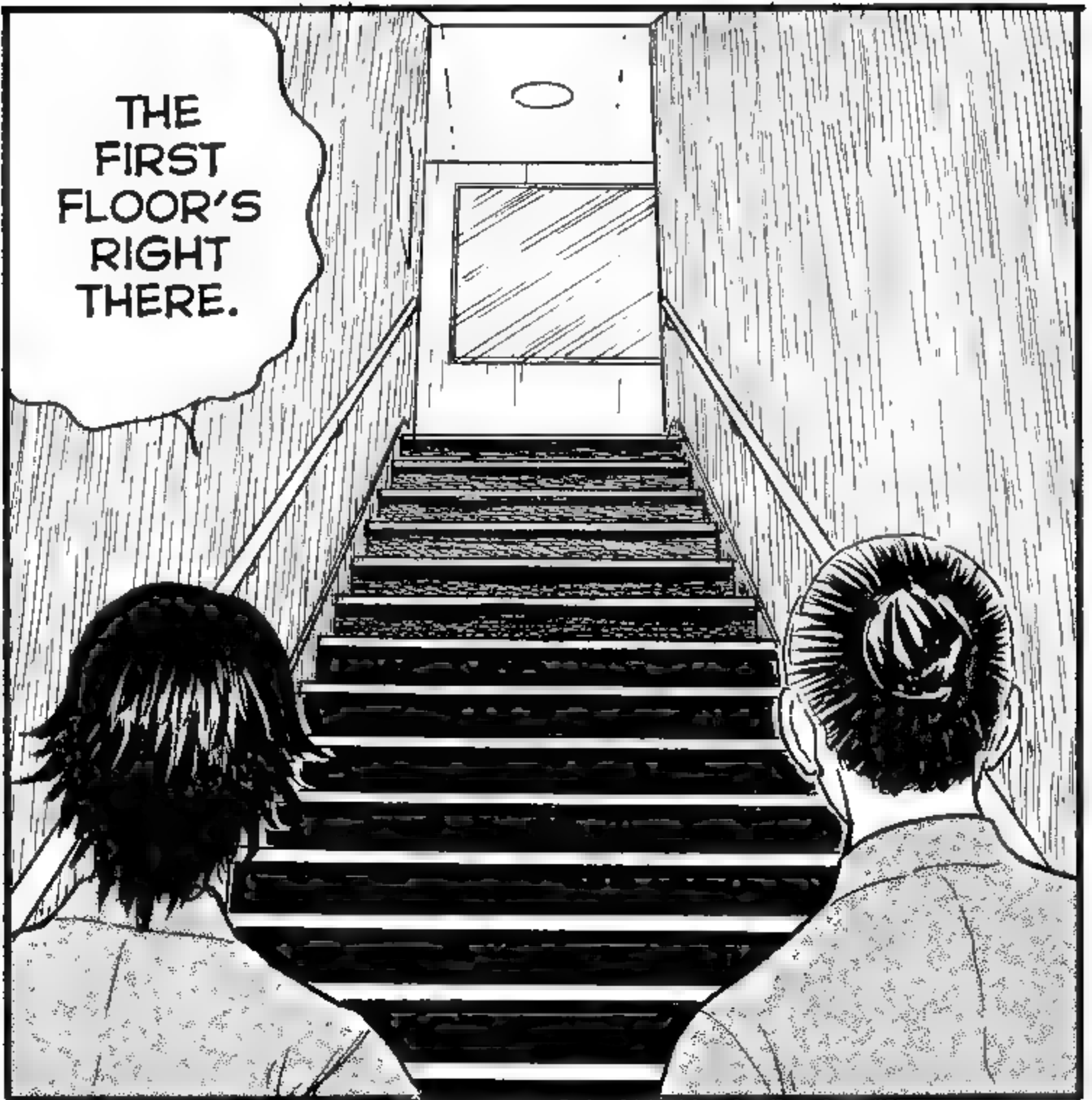


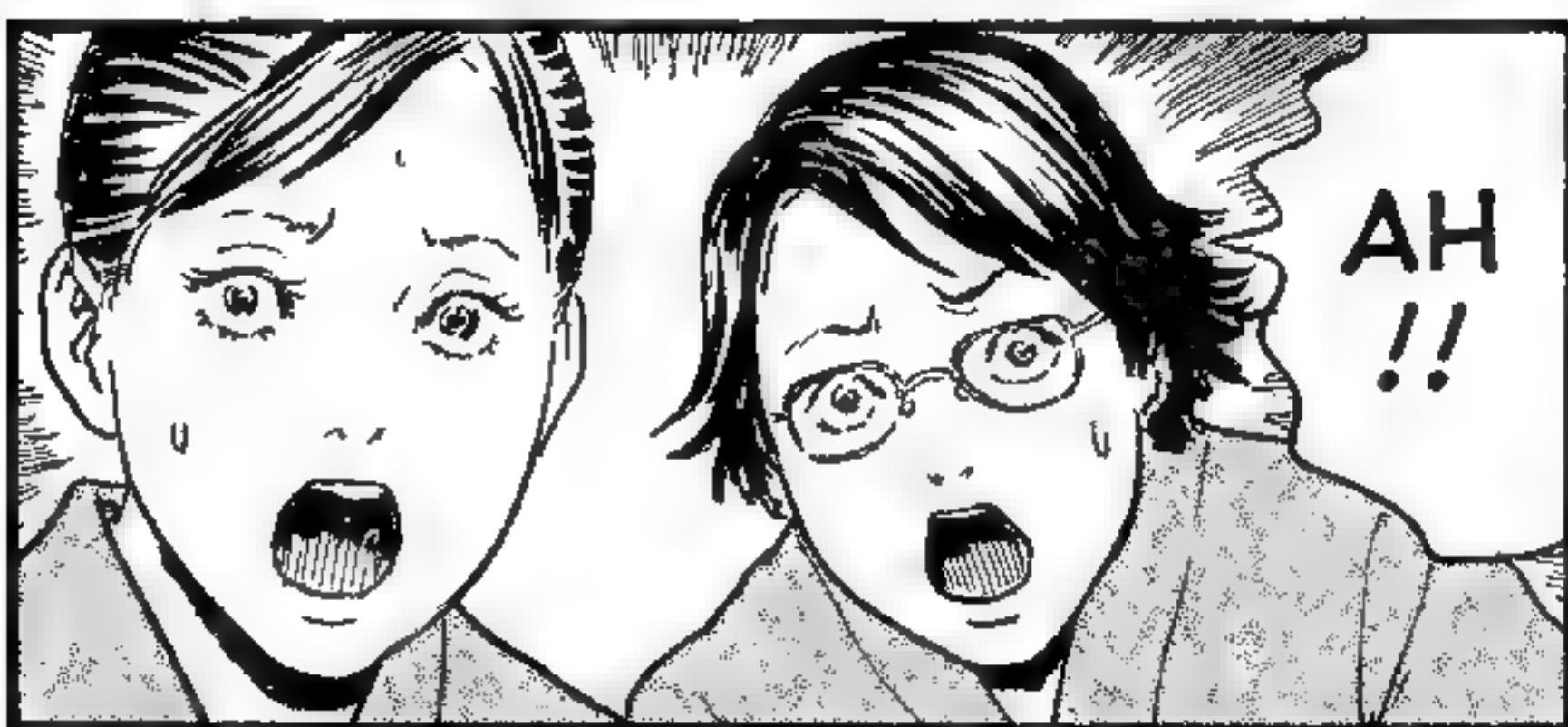
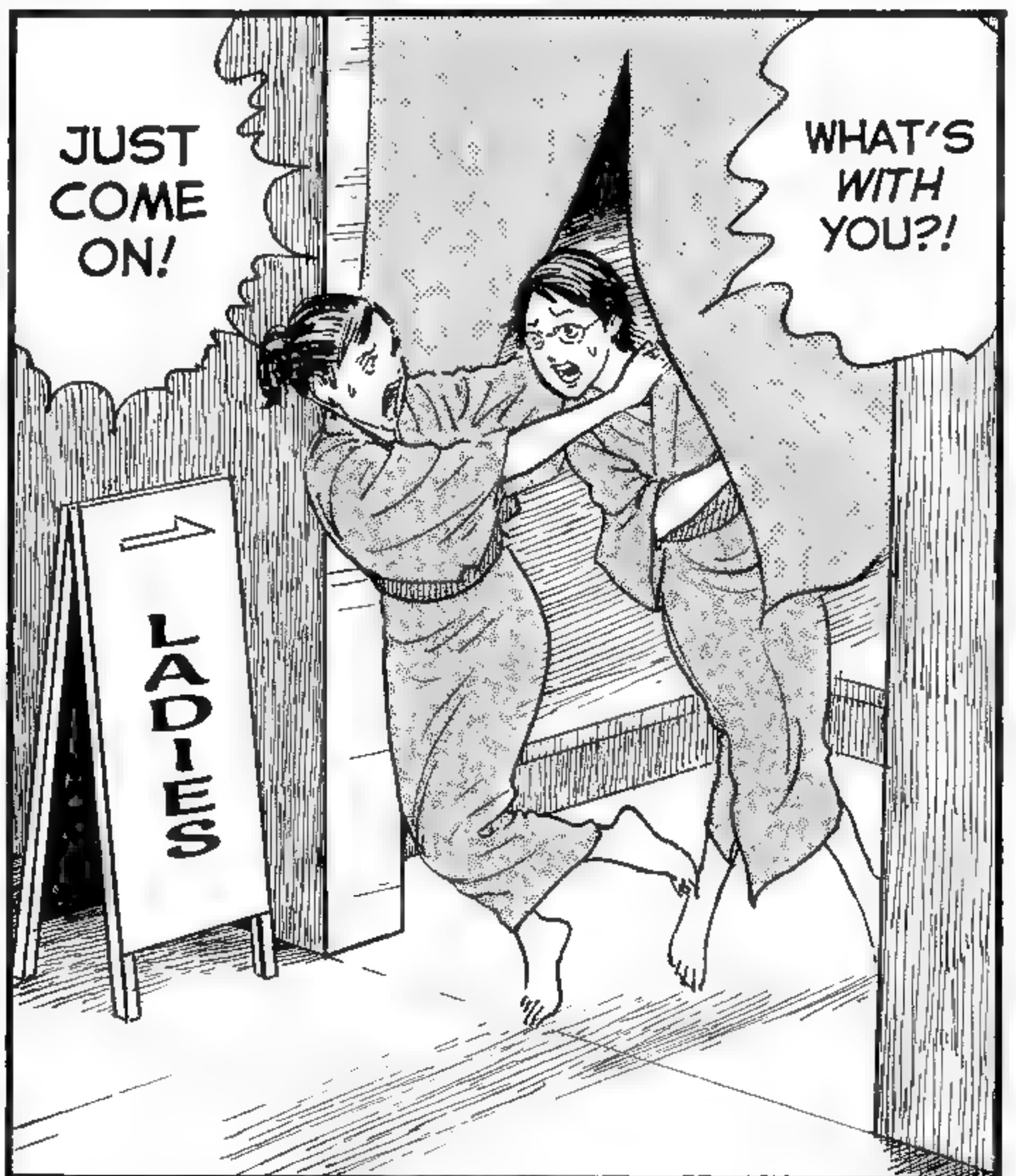
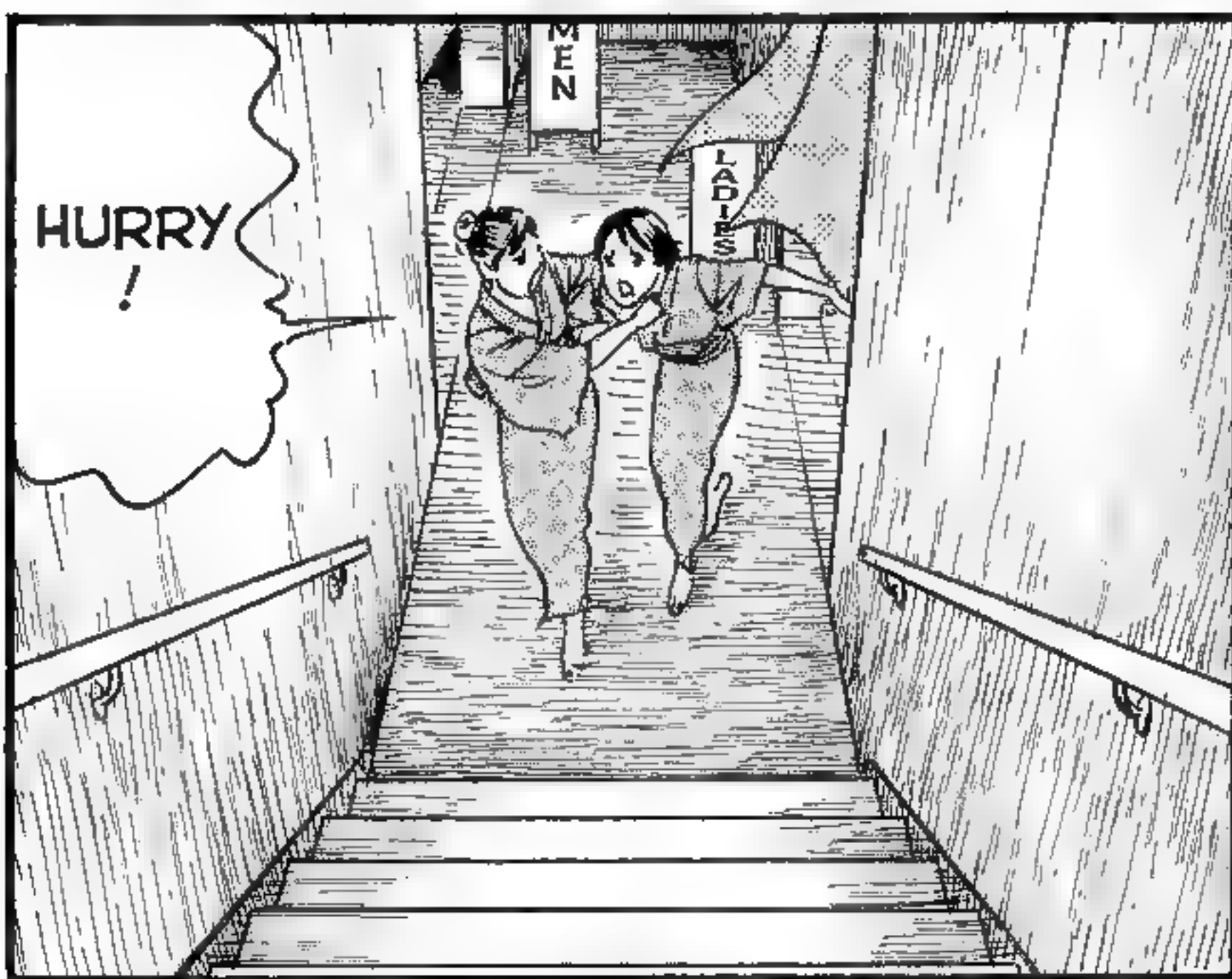
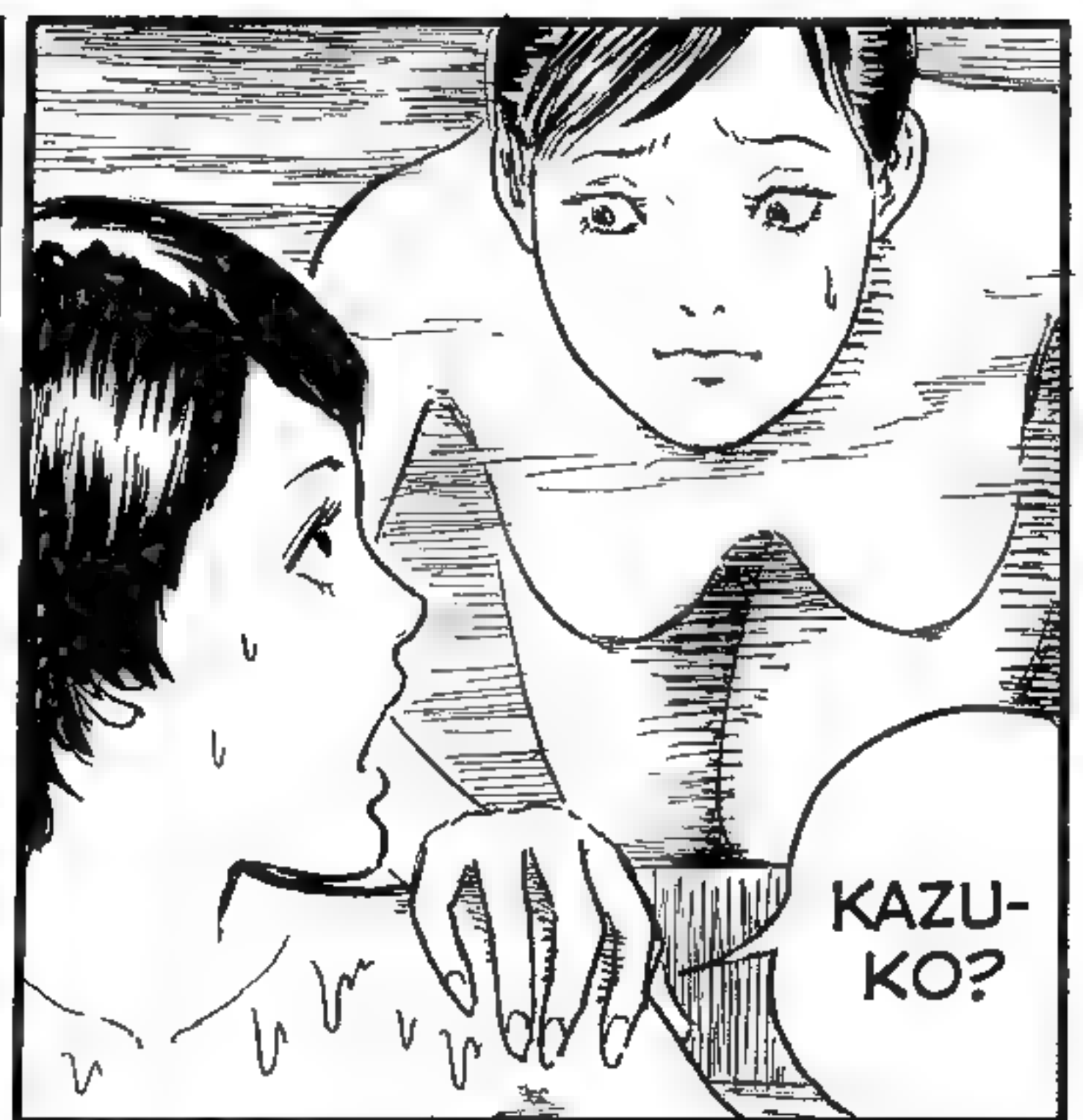
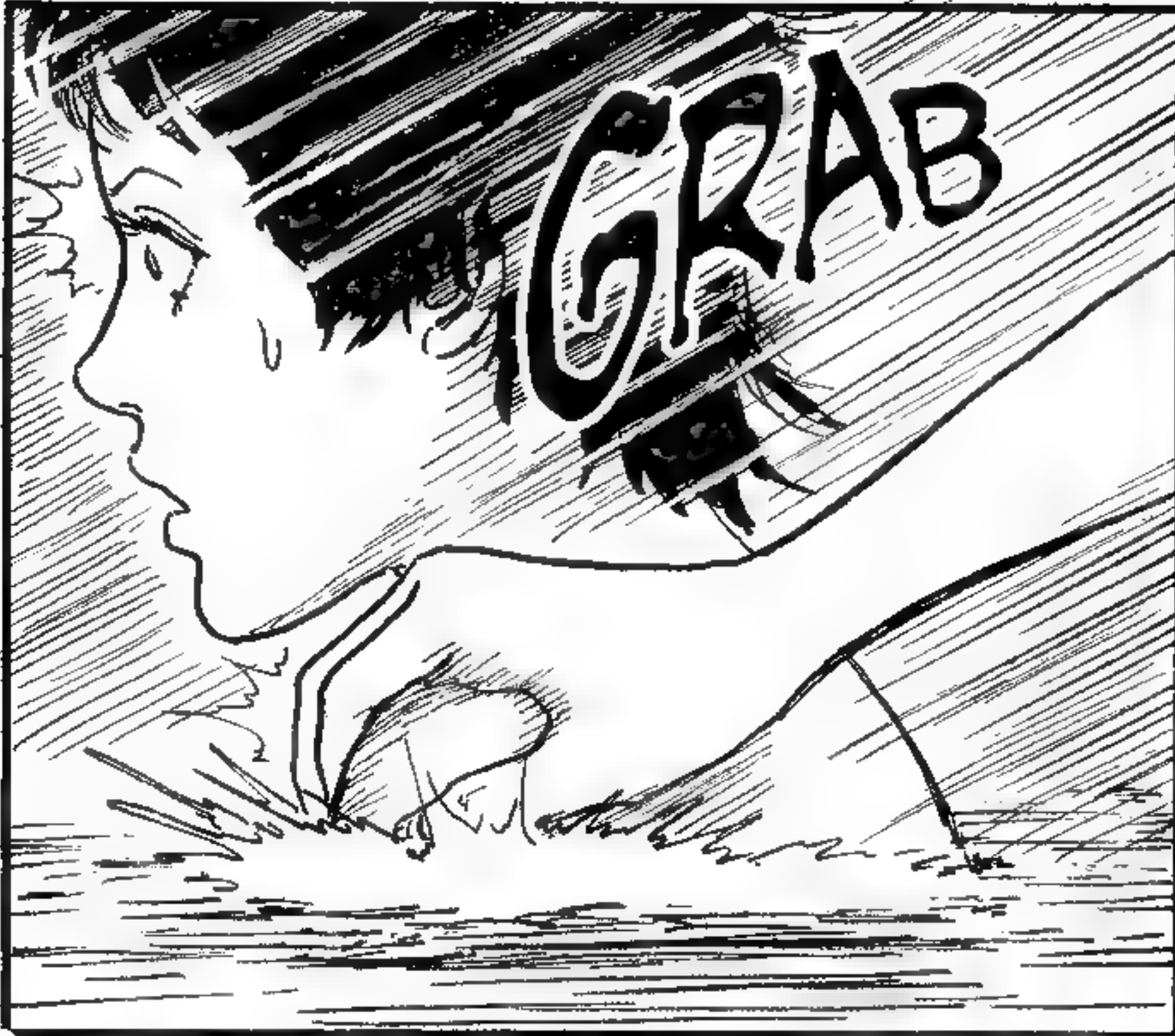


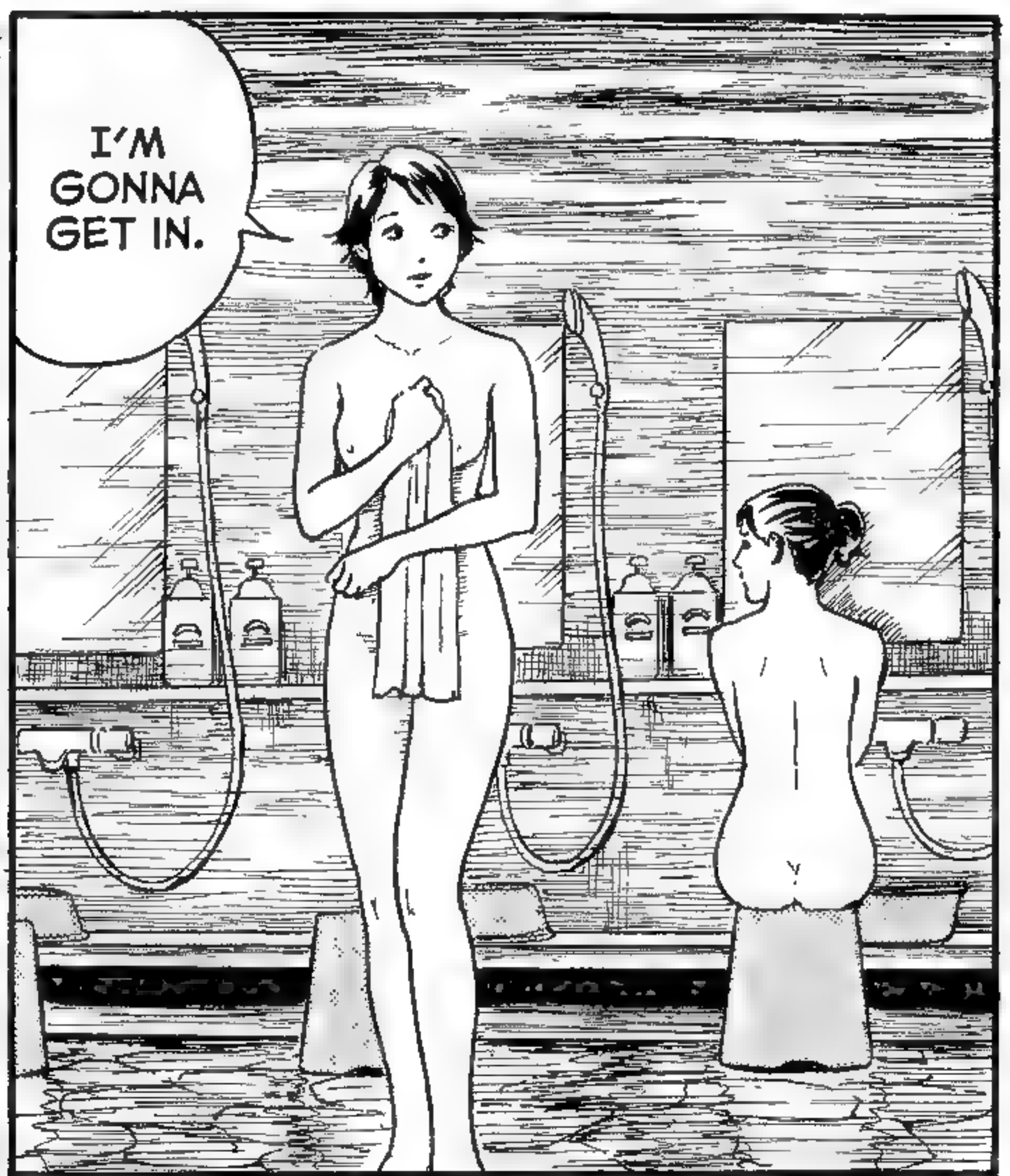
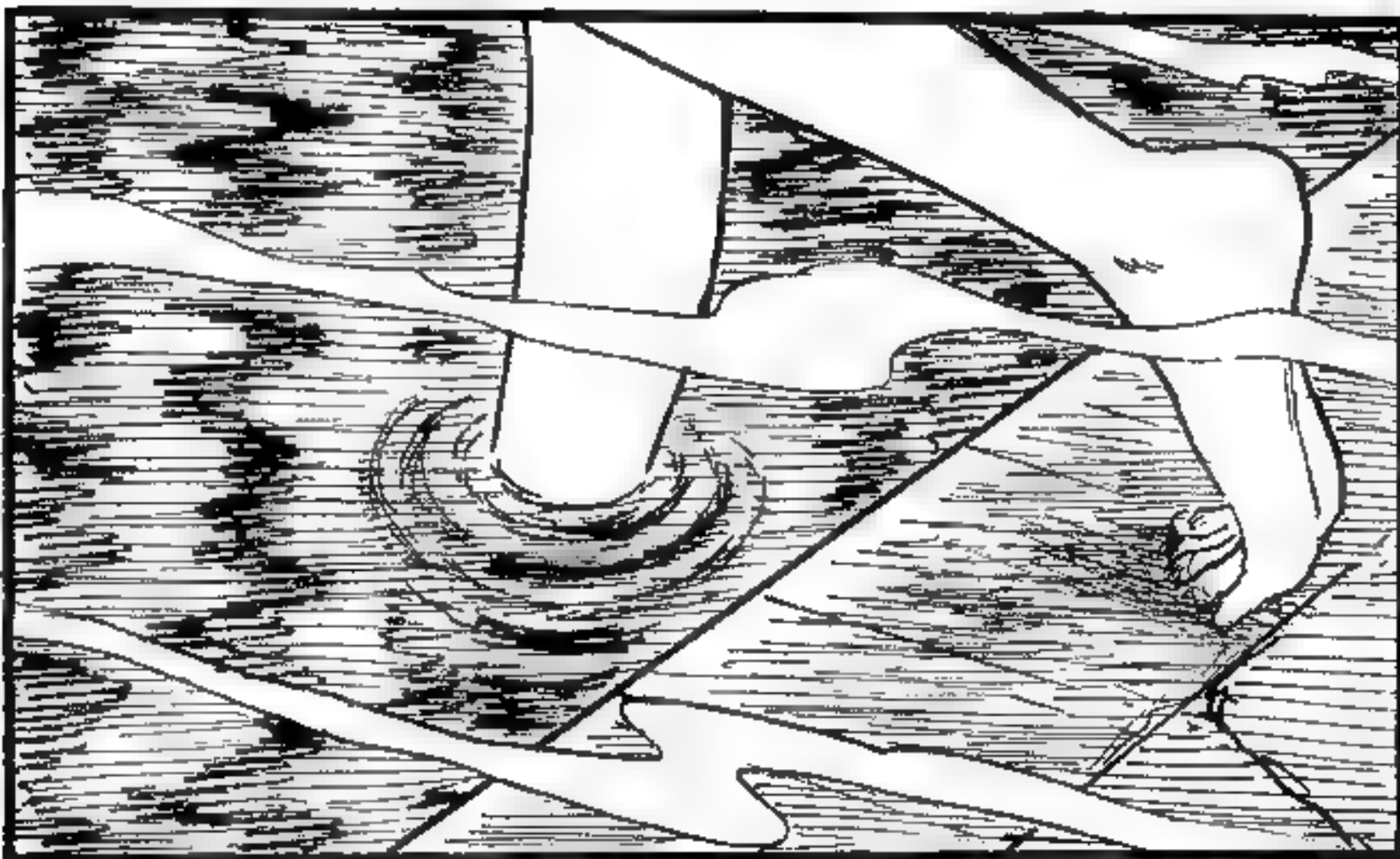
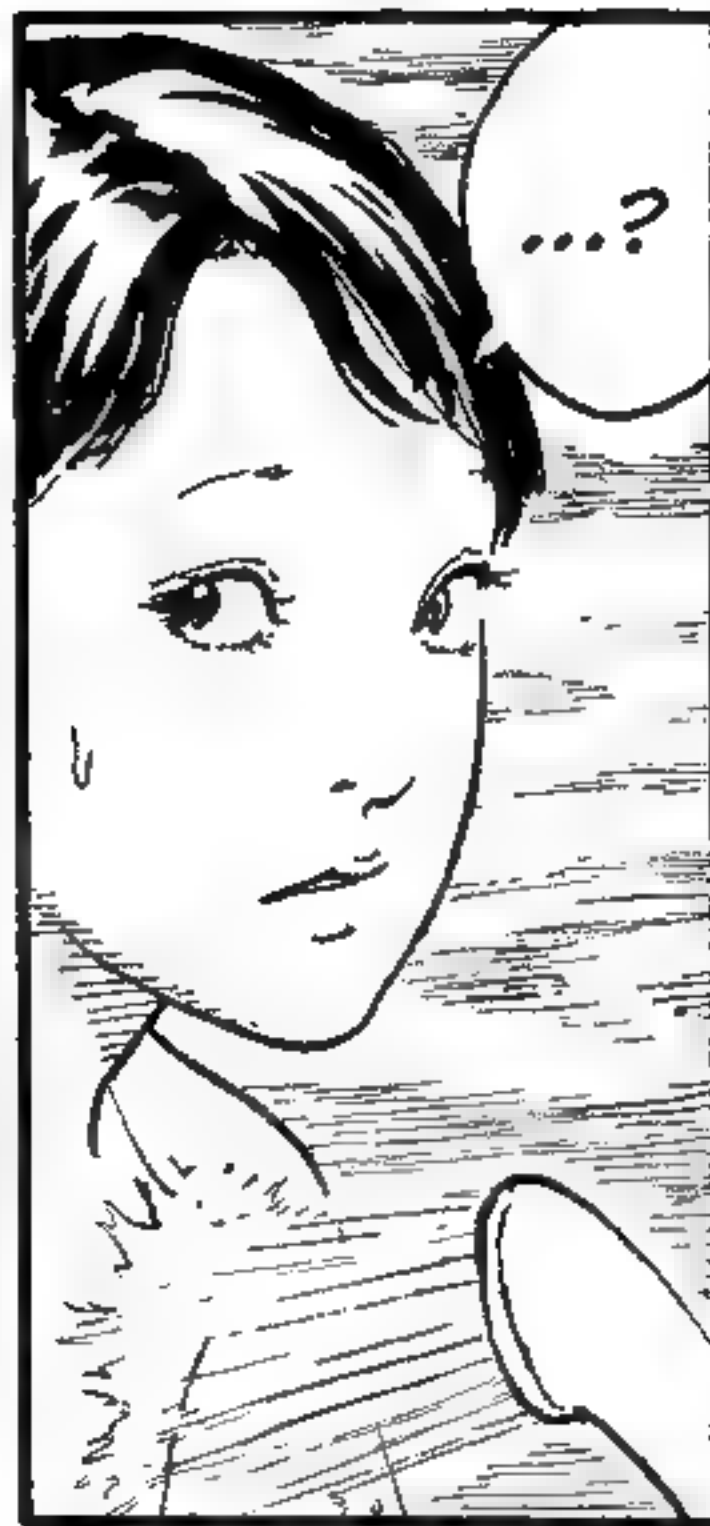
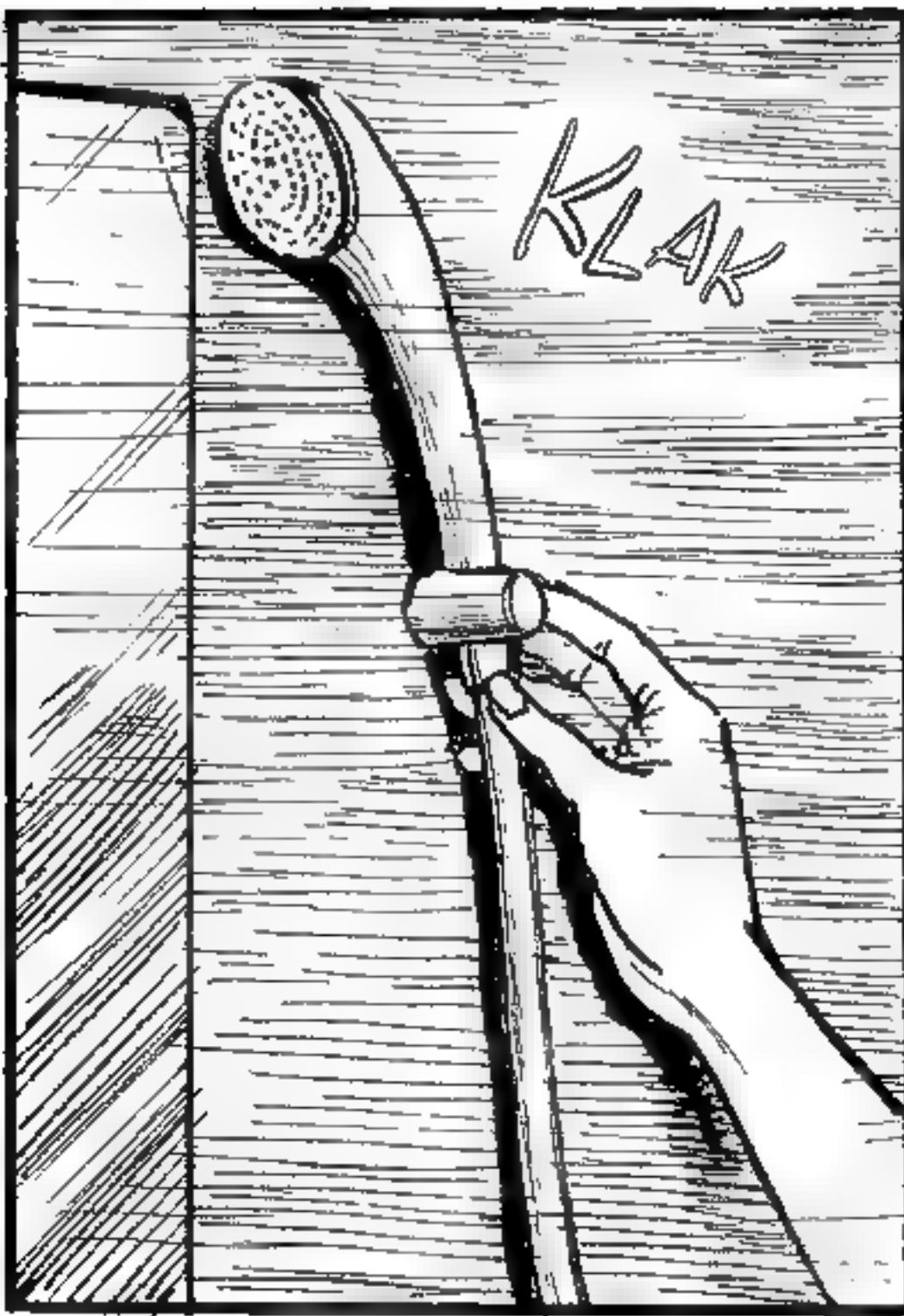
NO ONE
WAS
TALKING...

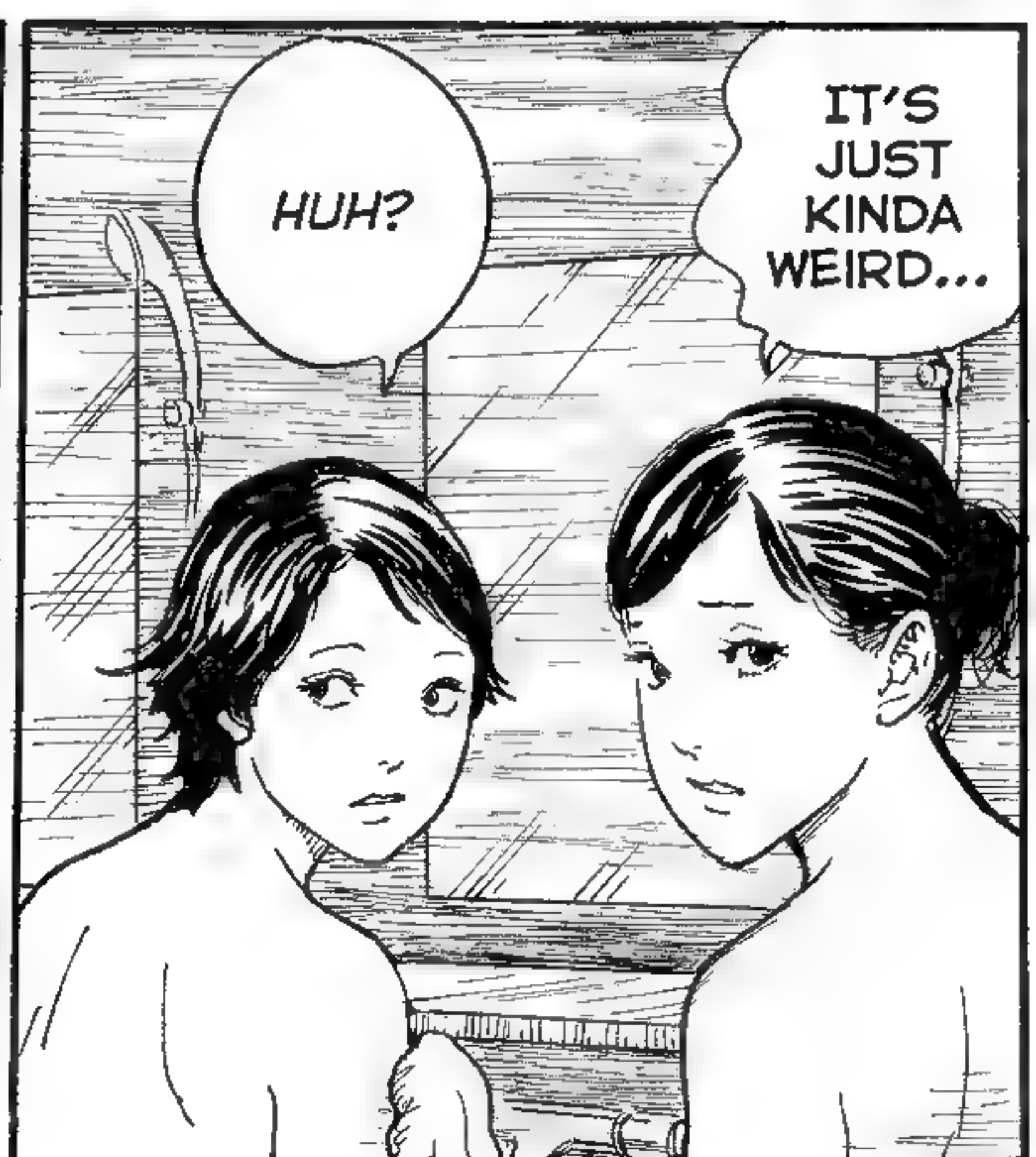
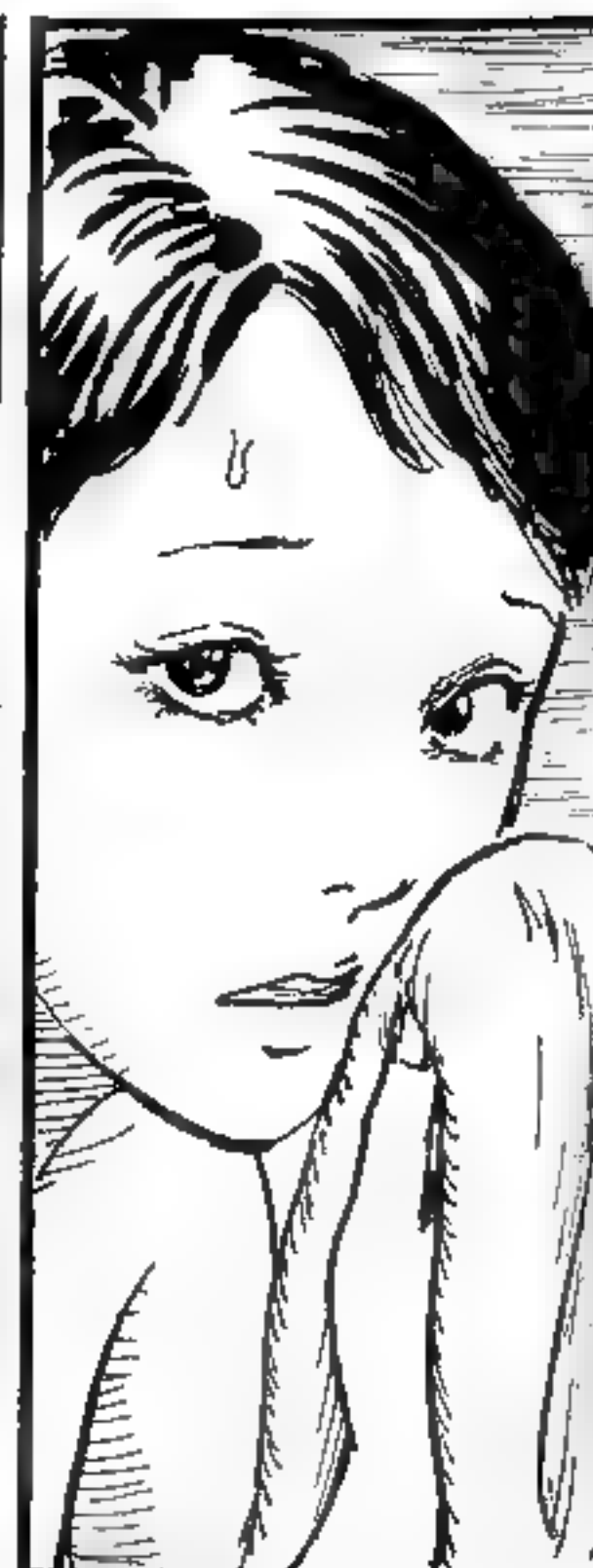
...AND NOT
A SINGLE
PERSON
GOT OUT
WHILE WE
WERE IN
THERE.

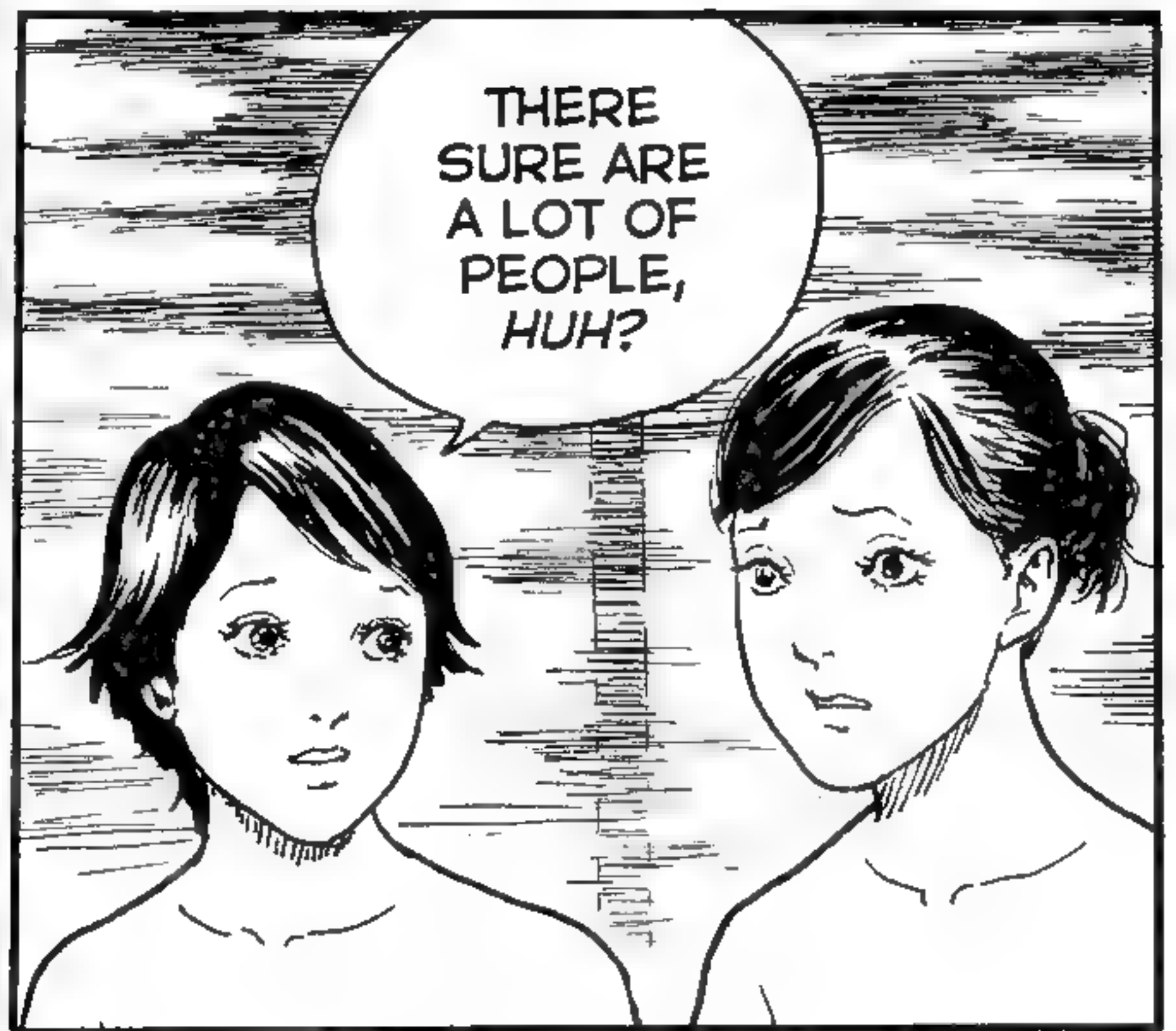
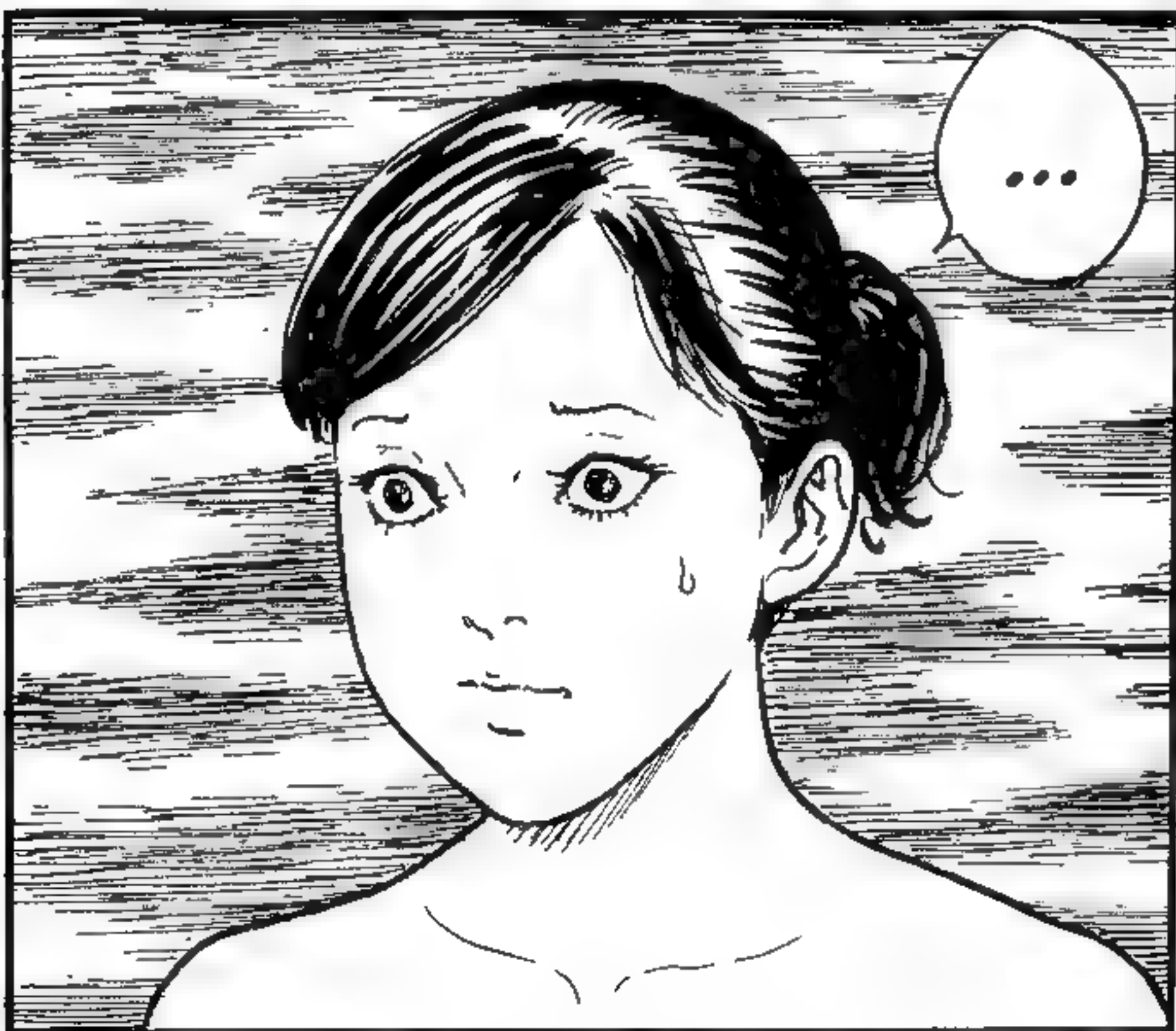
...THEY
WERE ALL
FACING
AWAY FROM
US.

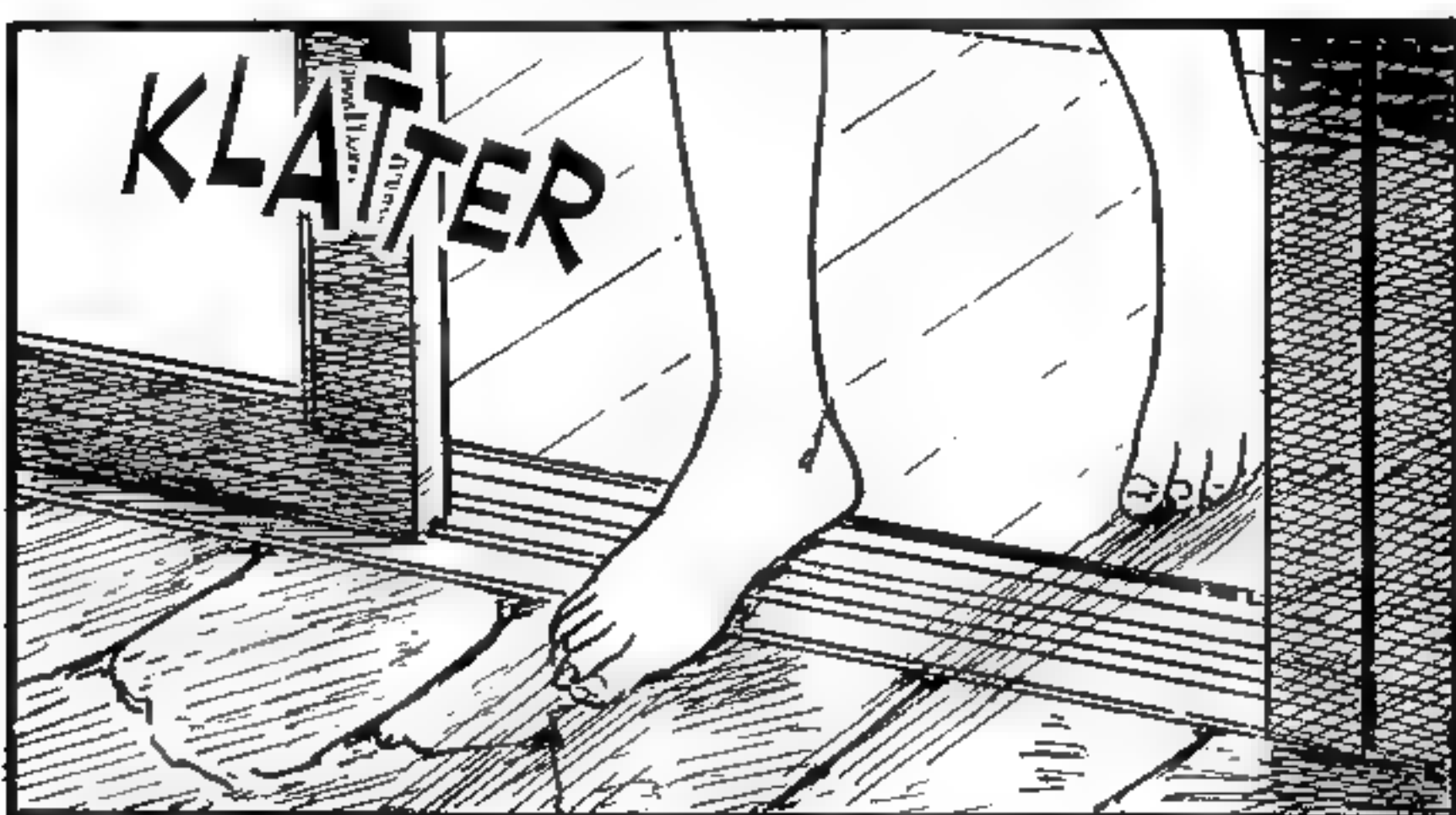
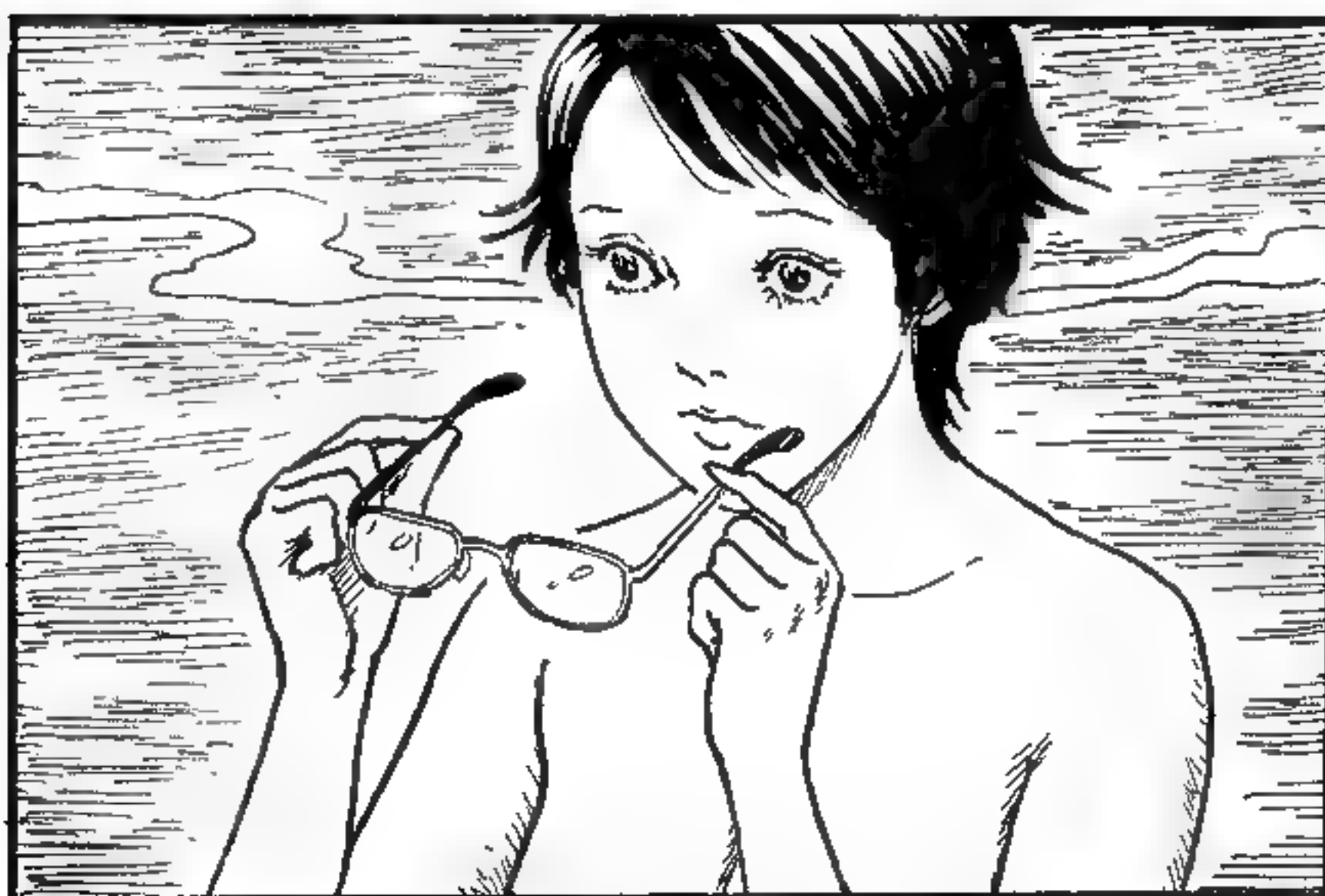
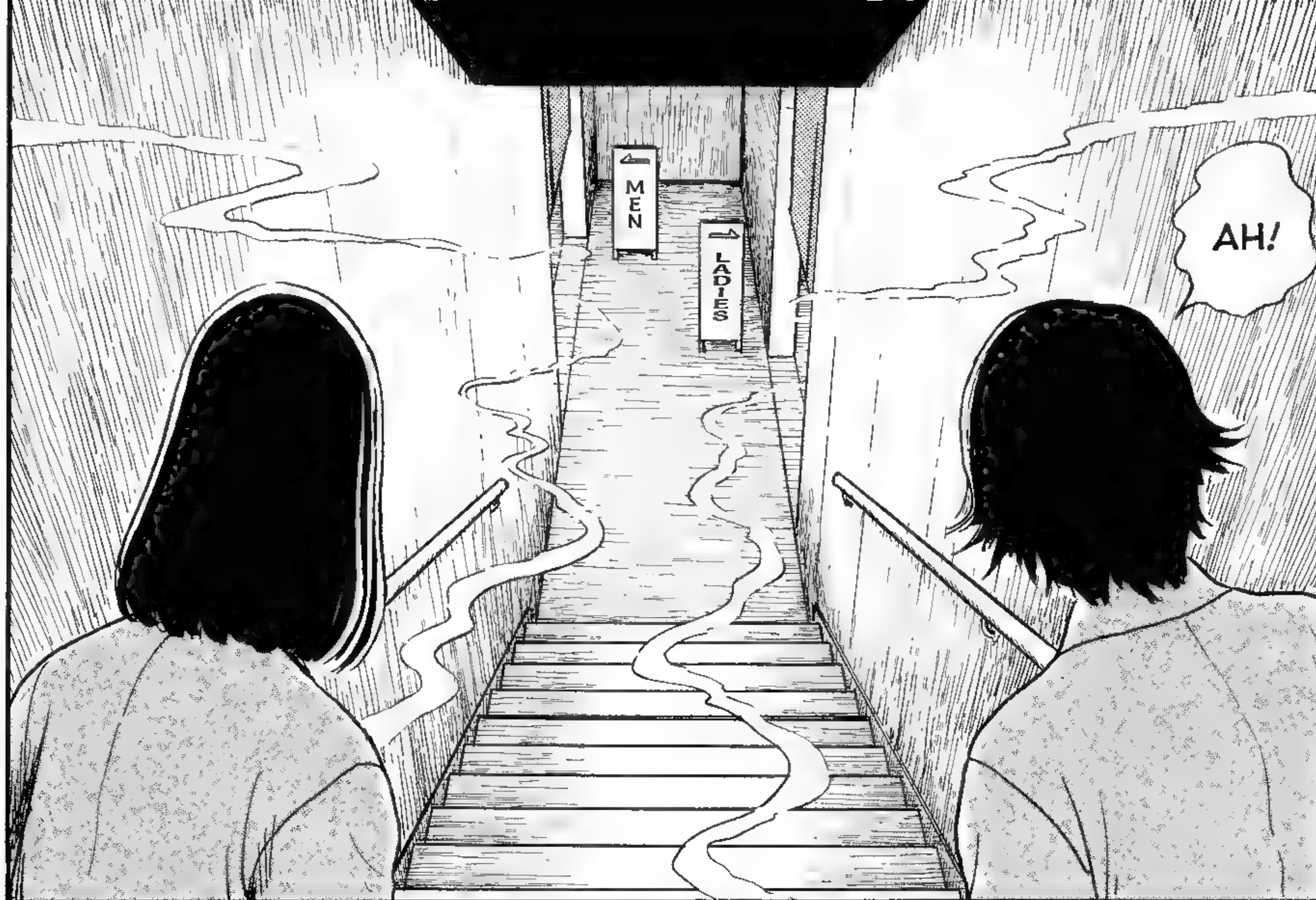






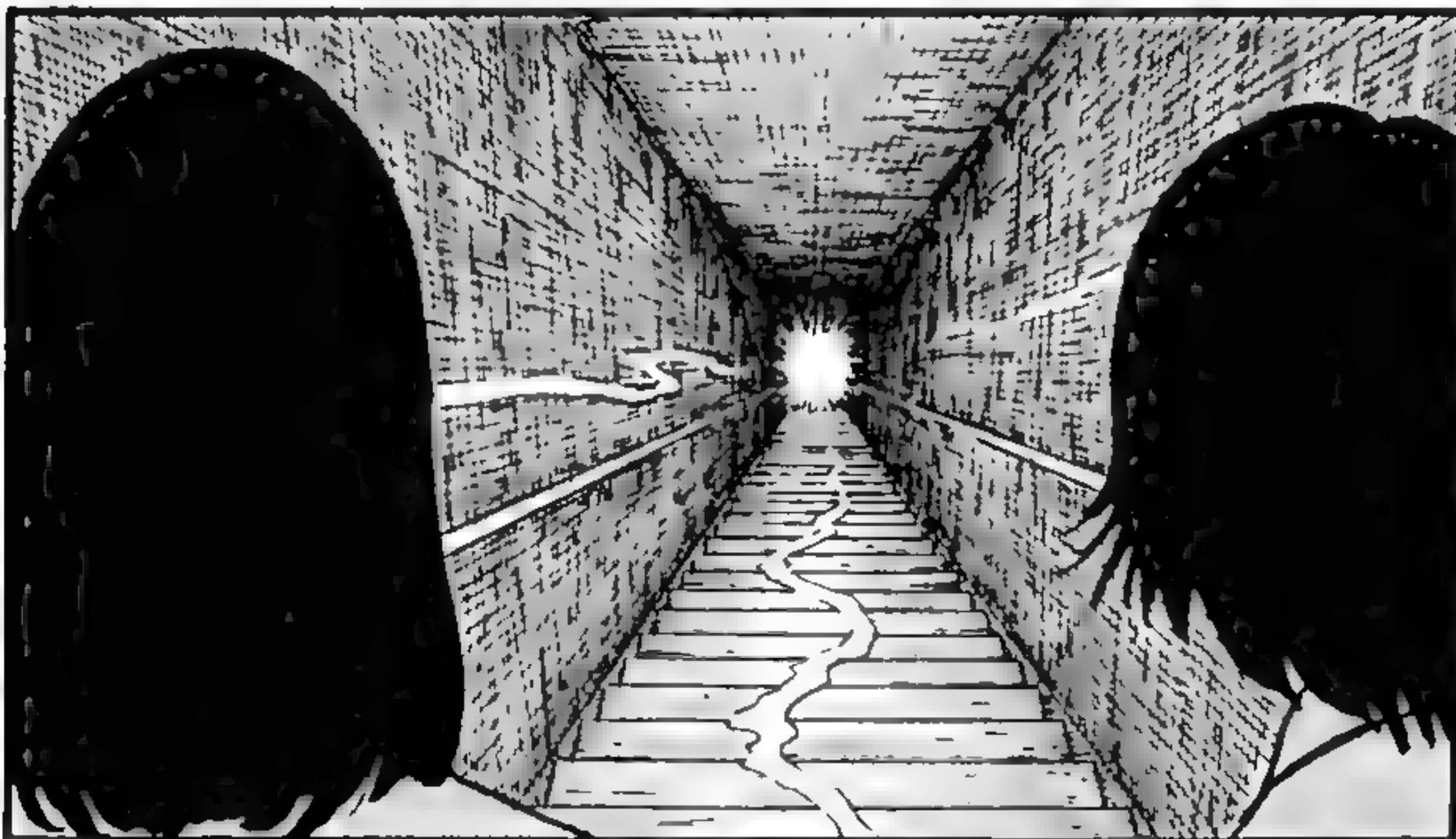


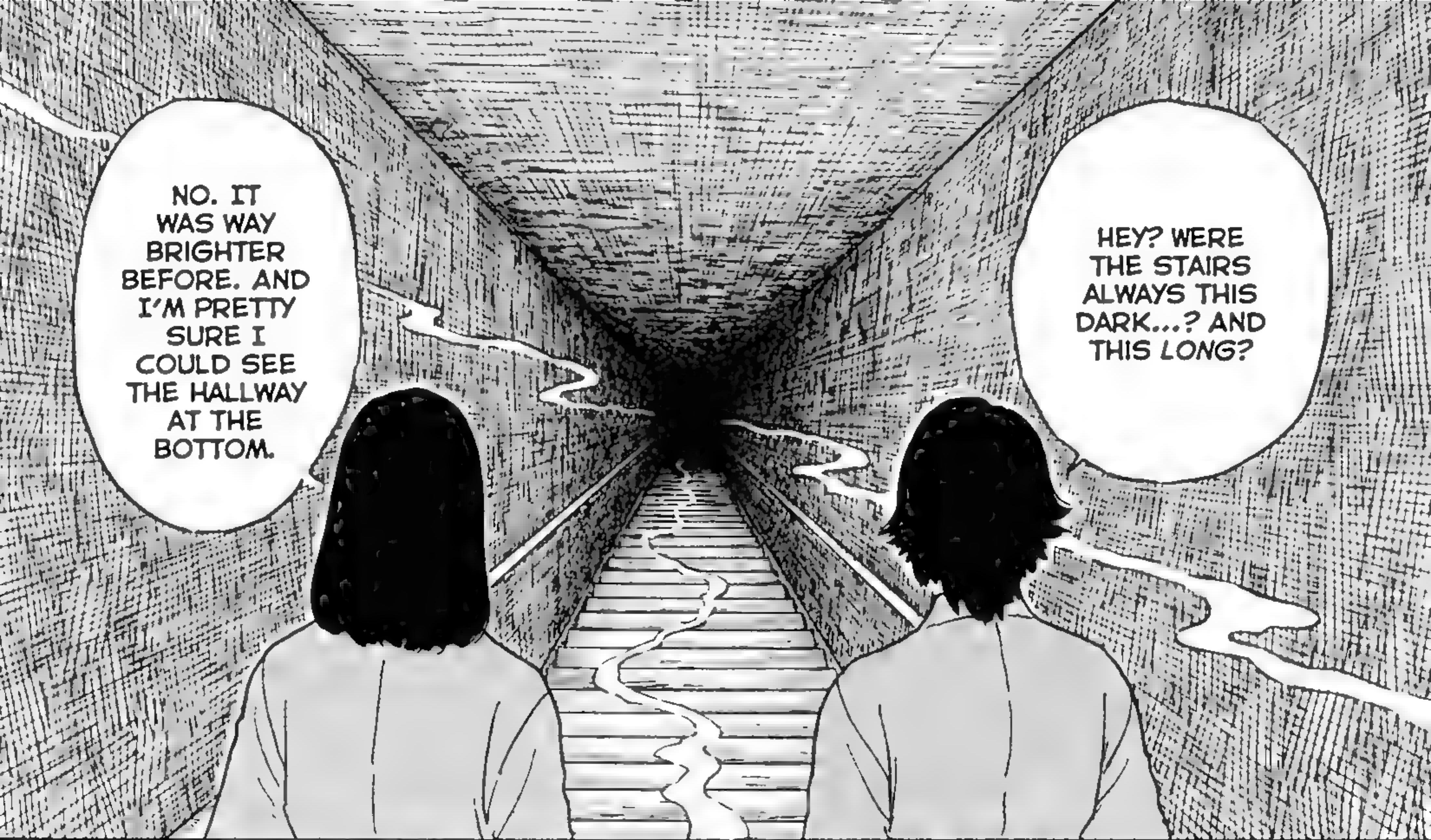






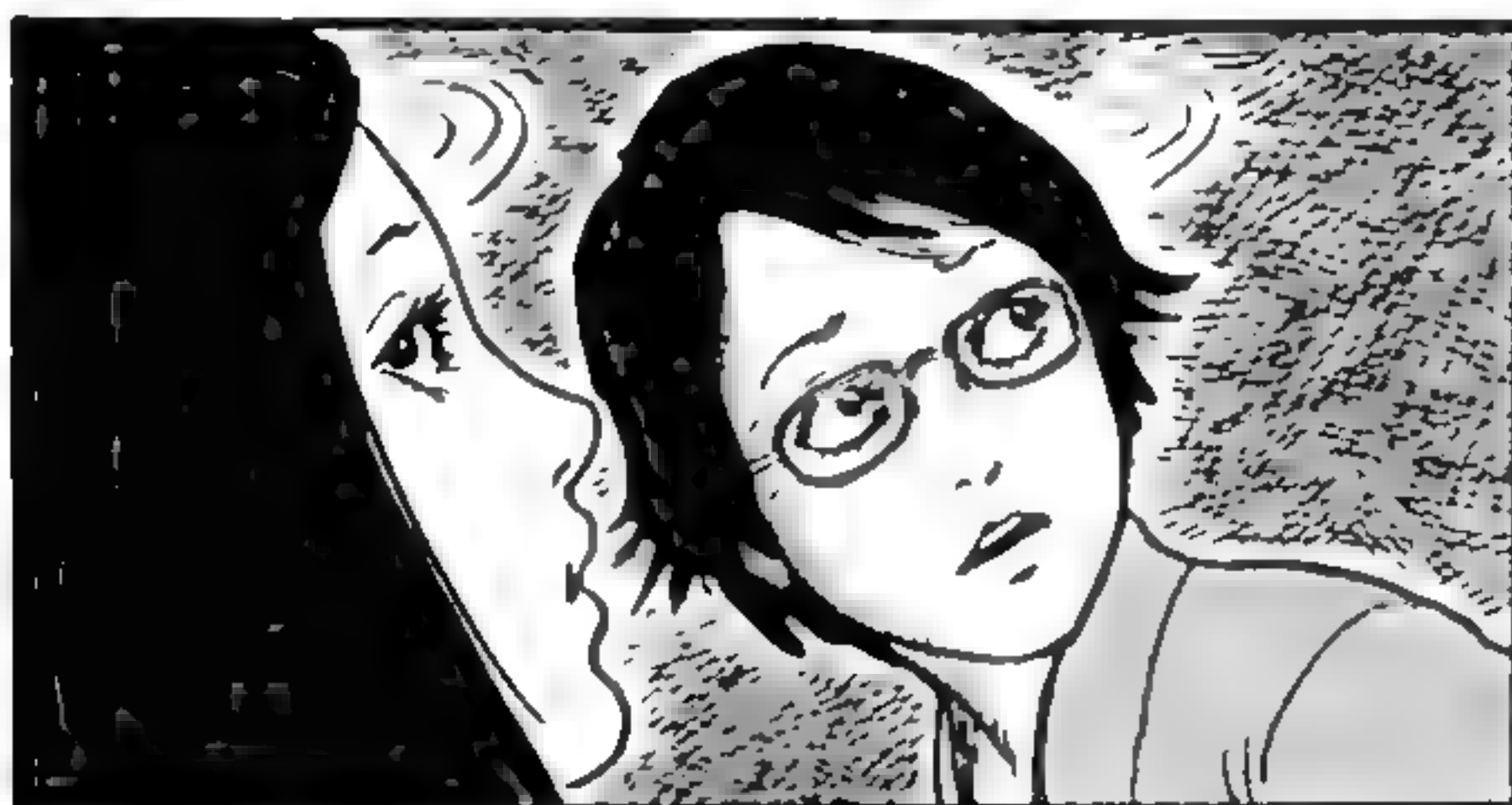






NO. IT WAS WAY BRIGHTER BEFORE. AND I'M PRETTY SURE I COULD SEE THE HALLWAY AT THE BOTTOM.

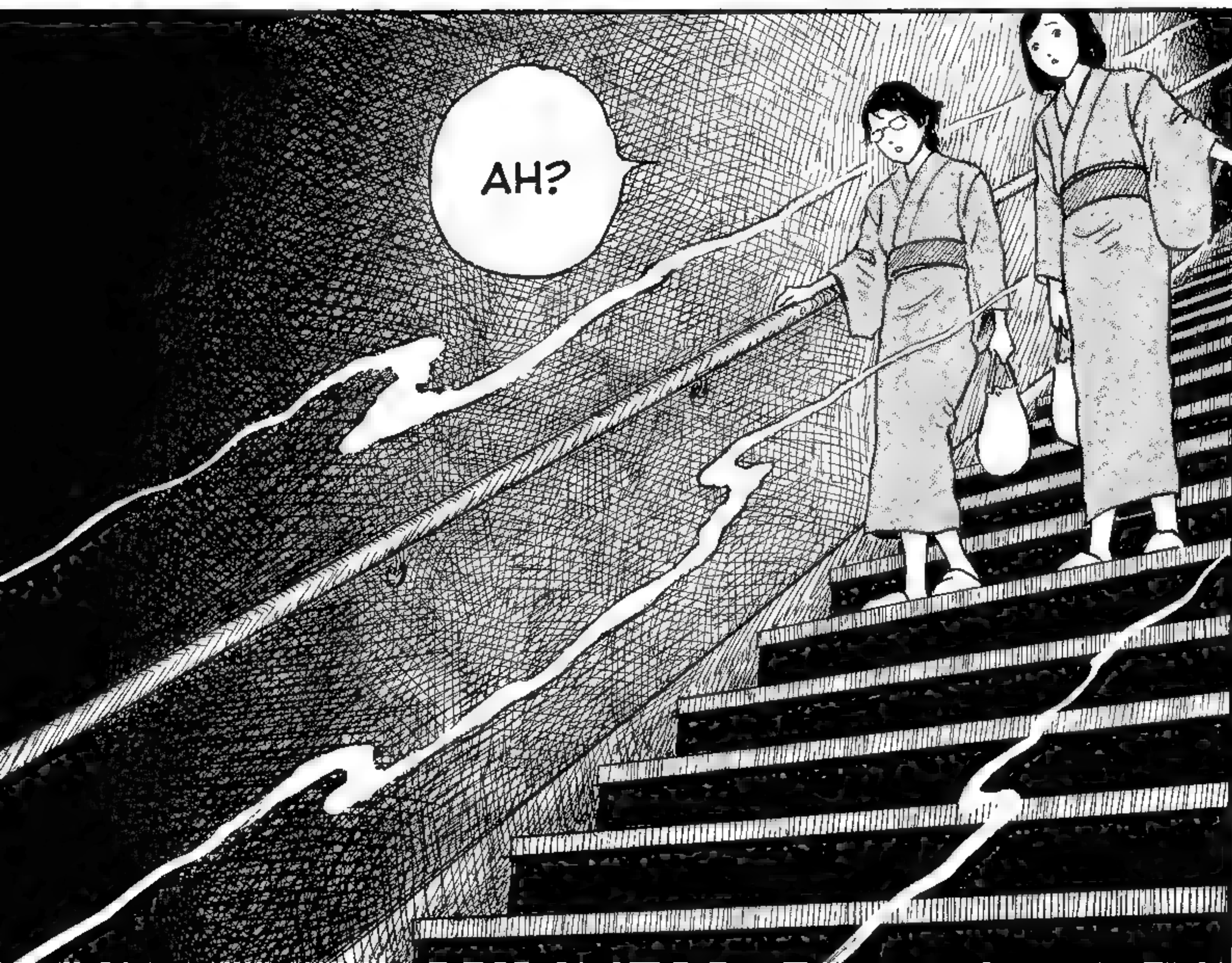
HEY? WERE THE STAIRS ALWAYS THIS DARK...? AND THIS LONG?

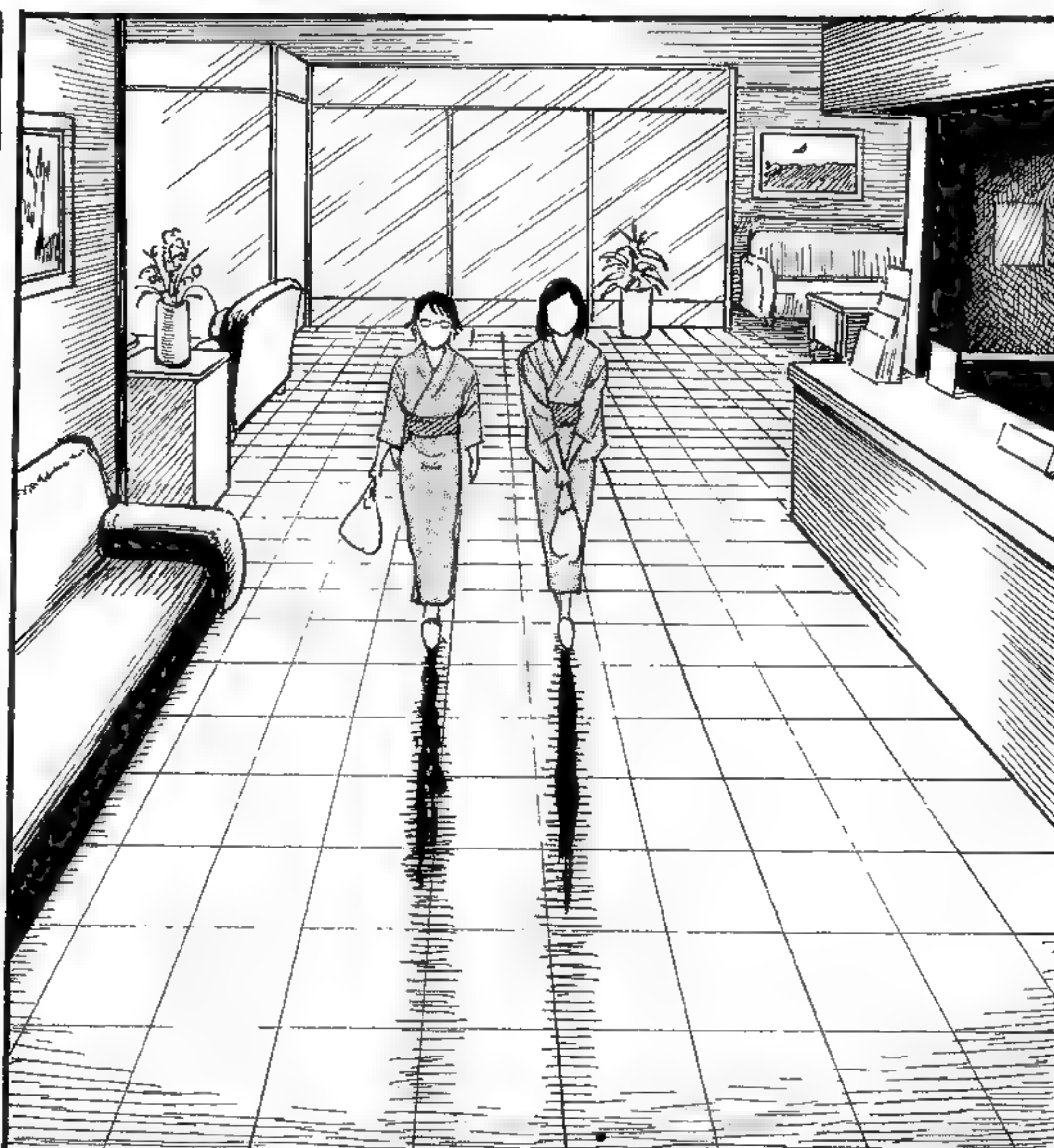
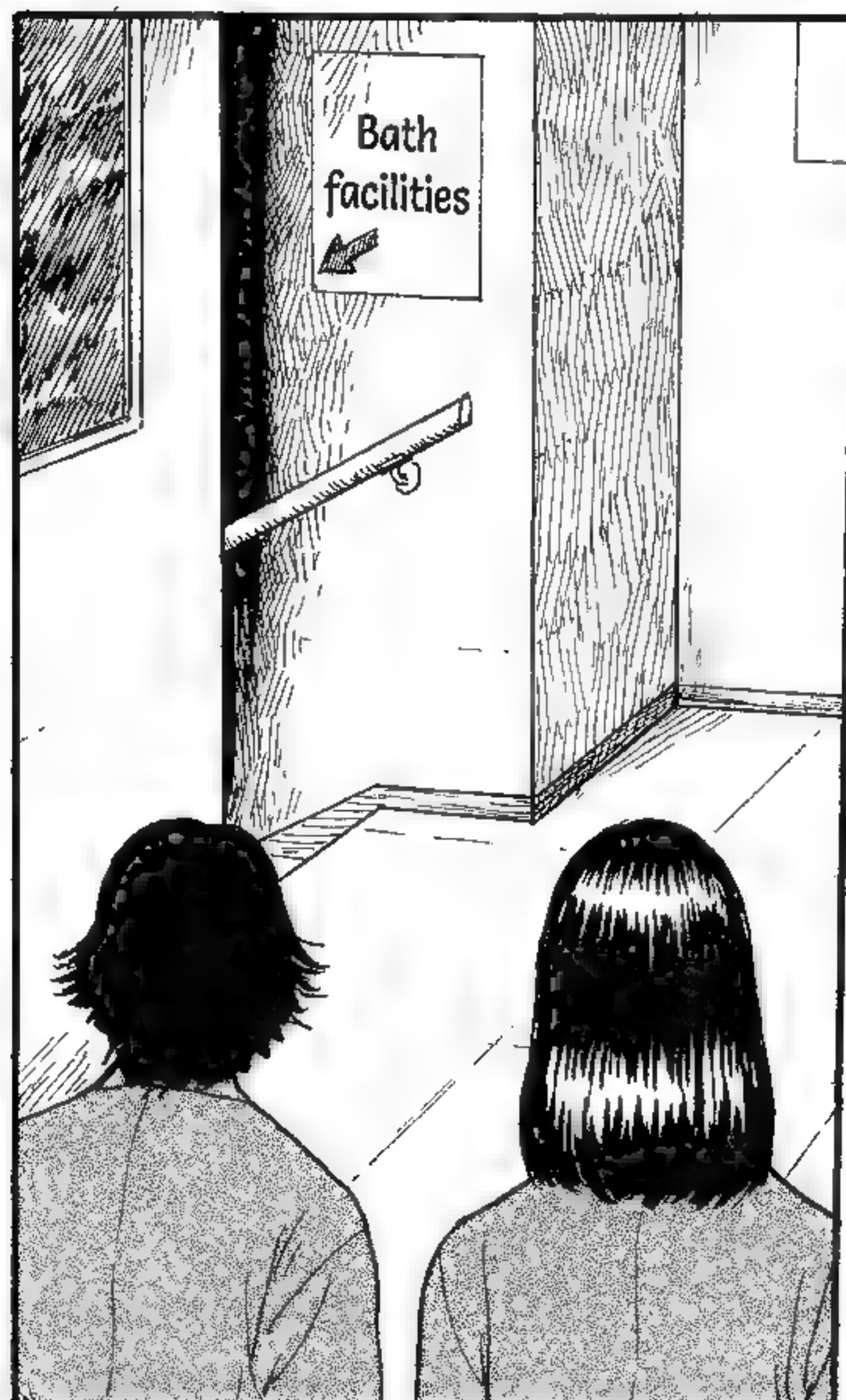


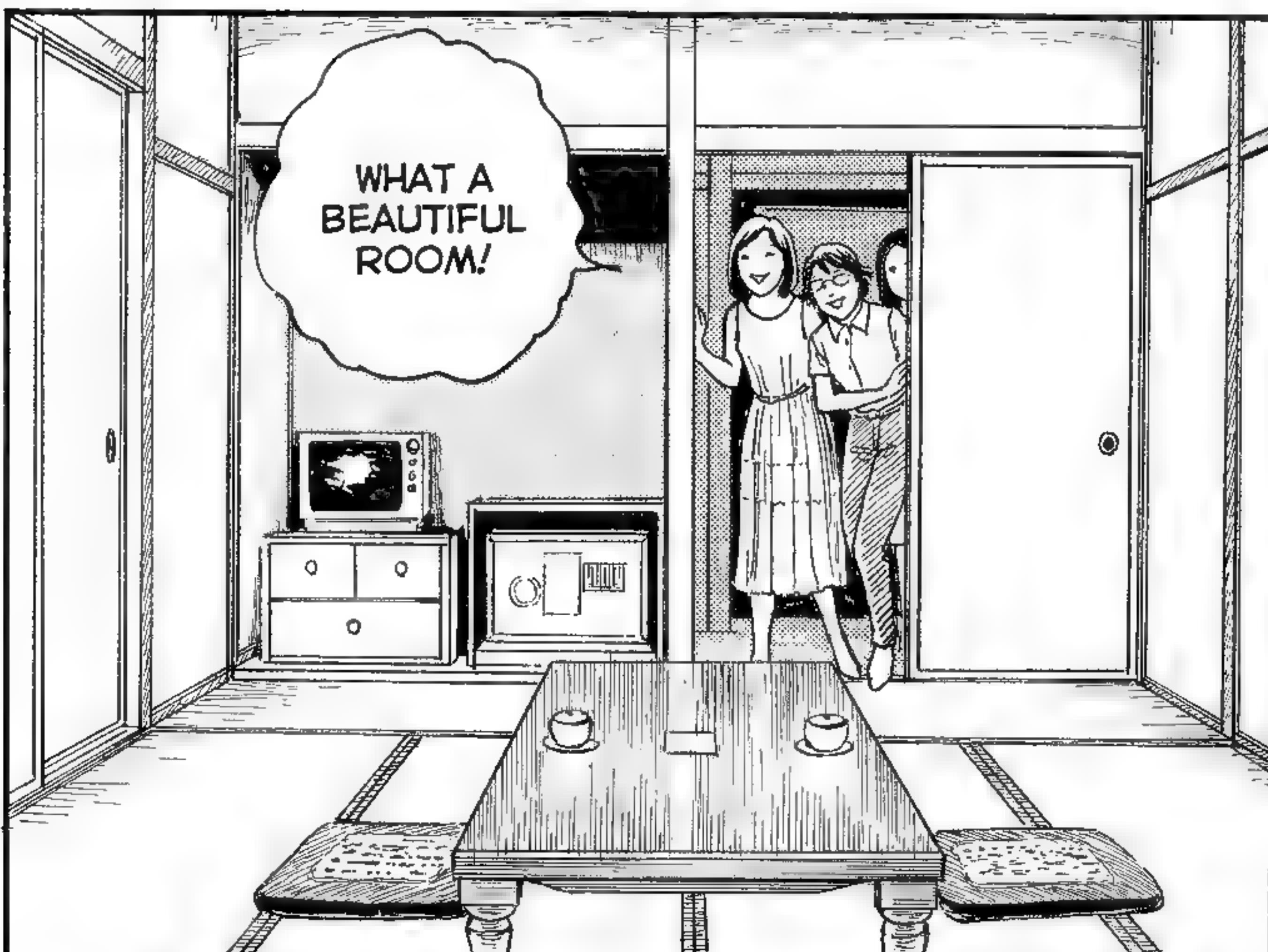
BUT... IT'S LIKE WE'VE BEEN WALKING DOWN THESE STAIRS FOREVER.



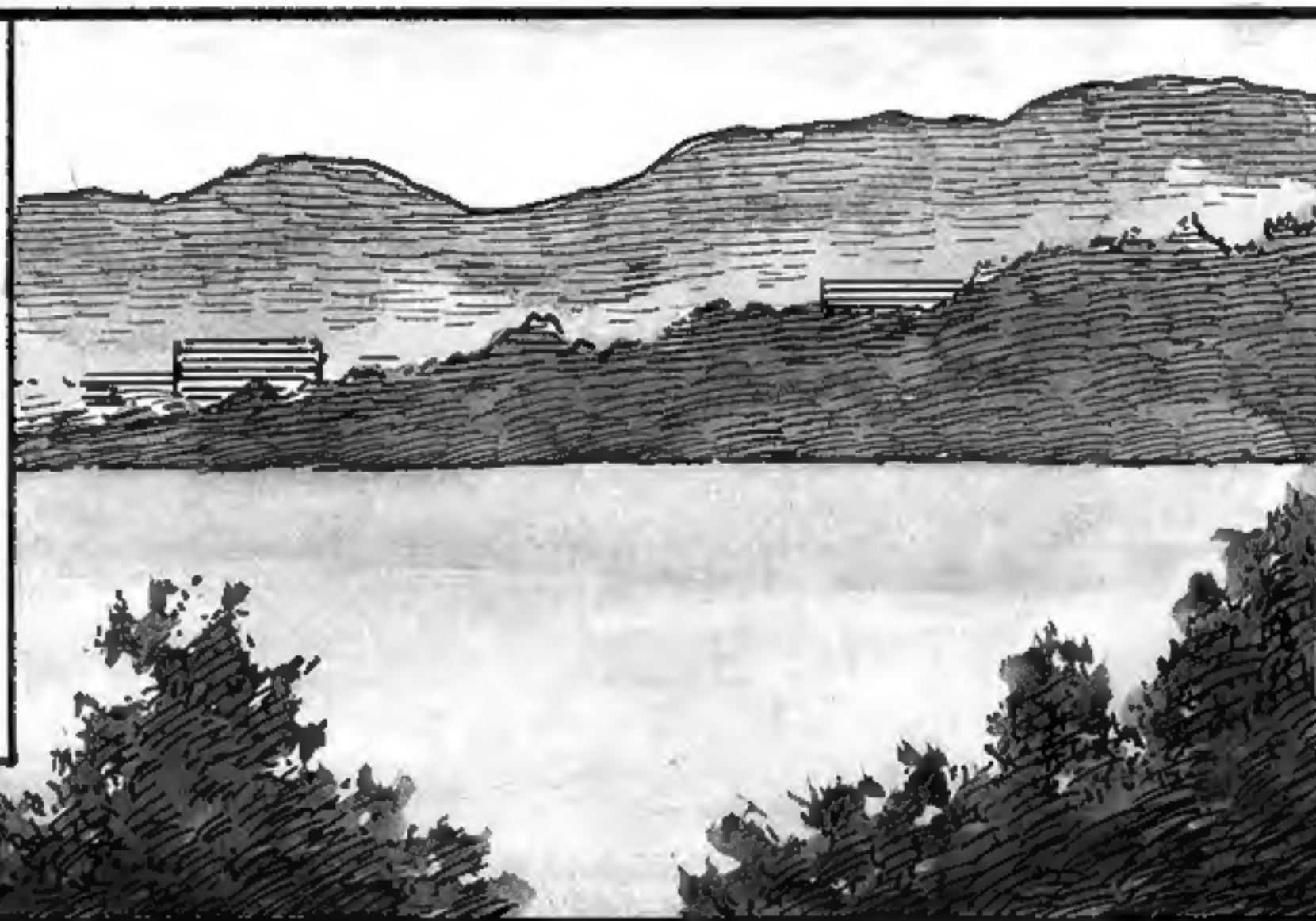








...I WENT ON
A GRADUATION
TRIP TO THE
TOHOKU
REGION WITH MY
BEST FRIEND,
KAZUKO.



ONE SUMMER,
OVER 30
YEARS AGO,
WHEN I WAS
A UNIVERSITY
STUDENT...



RIGHT? THE
AREA'S SO
BEAUTIFUL,
AND I HEAR
THE FOOD'S
GREAT,
TOO.



THE
HOTEL
SEEMS
GREAT,
HUH,
NAOMI?

BONUS MANGA

Summer Graduation Trip



Now begins the manga portion of *Stitches* by Junji Ito, a previously unpublished story based on a true tale collected by Hirokatsu Kihara, to celebrate the collection of these stories into book form.

...Gulp.



Turn the page to read the bonus manga story by Junji Ito. This story has been printed in the original Japanese format and reads right-to-left in order to preserve the orientation of the artwork.

STITCHES

Short Stories by HIROKATSU KIHARA
Art by JUNJI ITO

KAI, SASU by Hirokatsu KIHARA, Junji ITO

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Translation & Adaptation: JOCELYNE ALLEN | Touch-Up Art & Lettering: ERIC ERBES ("Summer Graduation Trip") | Cover & Graphic Design: ADAM GRANO | Editor: MASUMI WASHINGTON

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First printing, March 2024



PARENTAL ADVISORY

STITCHES is rated T+ for Older Teen and is recommended for ages 16 and up. This volume contains graphic violence and horror themes.

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